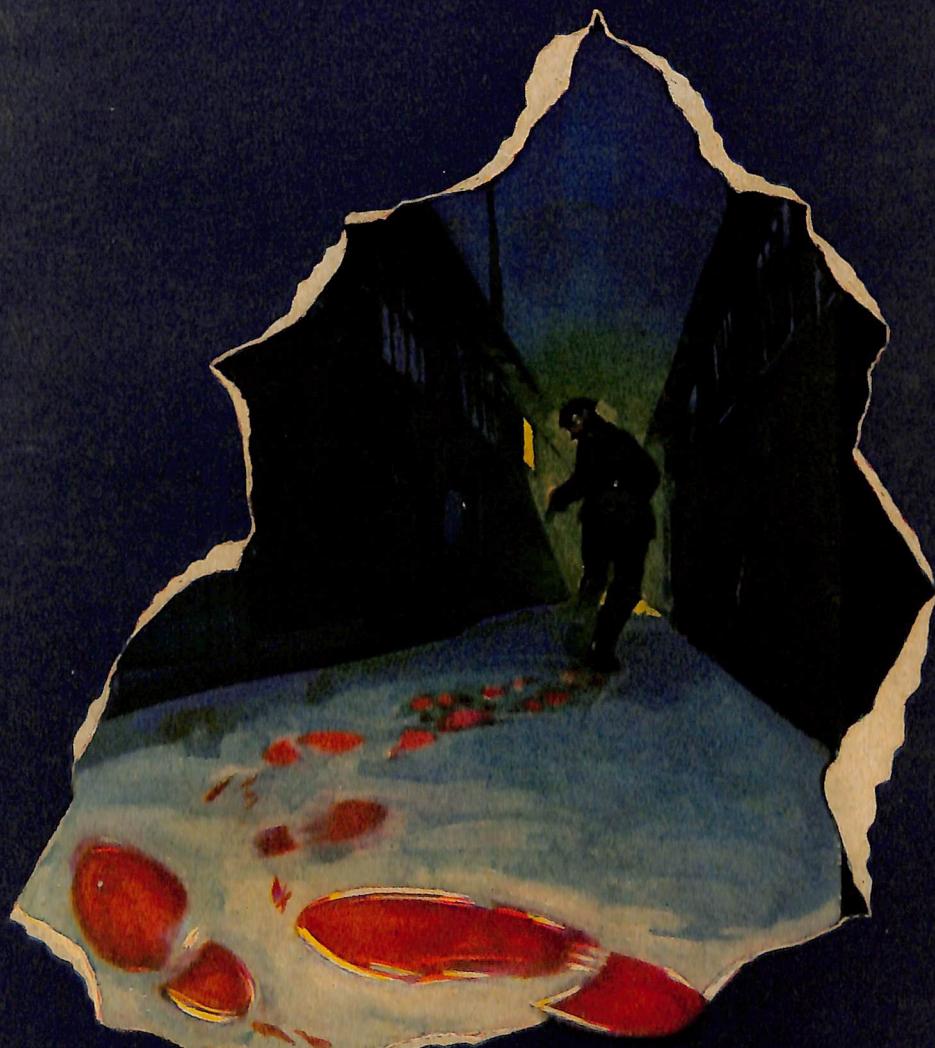


STREET & SMITH'S

Detective Story Magazine

APRIL 1941



TEN CENTS

Death On Post #7

By Frank Gruber

Joe!.. in the HOSPITAL?...

why, he only had the sniffles when
we went dancing Saturday!



You have probably known several cases like that . . . the medical records report lots of them. And they all lead up to this warning:

Don't take a cold lightly. Don't neglect it. Take care of it at once.

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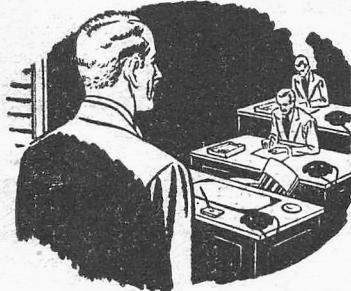
And in tests conducted during 9 years of research, those who gargled Listerine twice a day had fewer colds, milder colds, and colds of shorter duration than those who did not use it. This success we ascribe to Listerine's germ-killing action on the mouth and throat surfaces.

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Detective Story Magazine

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Private Danny Higgins is walking his first tour of guard. The post is a lonely one until Danny stumbles over the corpse. From then on things happen—and Private Higgins, ex-bookie, is in the thick of them.

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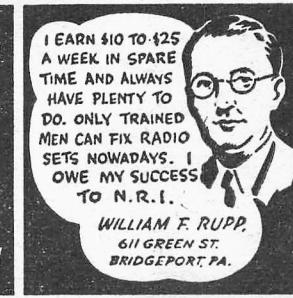
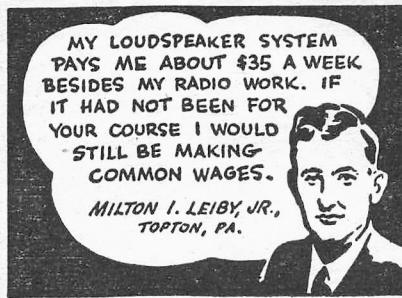
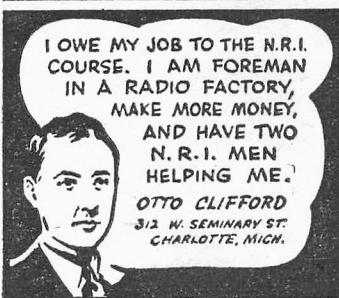
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THERE is "Death On Post #7"! To the seventeen service men who, according to the rules of this contest, send in the best solutions, we will award the following prizes:

1st prize	\$100 in cash
2nd prize	\$50 in cash
3rd to 17th prizes—One 5-tube radio each, valued at \$10. Total \$150.	

A Grand Total of \$300 in 17 prizes.

The story, "Death On Post #7," was written by Frank Gruber, author of the best-selling mystery novels, "The French Key," "The Laughing Fox," and "The Talking Clock." Mr. Gruber, who was once a soldier himself, has turned his expert craftsmanship to your life, the life in the army training camps, and has written the mystery of his career for Detective Story and you.

Gruber has played no tricks on you. All the clues are hidden in the first installment, which is published in this issue and which goes on sale February 28, 1941. Follow these clues and call the turn—on the murderer.

RULES OF THE CONTEST

Who may compete: Only men in the service of the United States army, navy or marines may compete.

Prizes will be awarded for the best solutions of the crime submitted. The name of the person responsible for "Death On Post #7" should be included in your solution.

The solution must be written in a letter not more than 50 words in length. The winning letters will be judged for the best solutions *only*. They will not be judged for neatness. They will not be rejected because of poor spelling or English. They may be written in pencil or ink, on any writing paper that may be available. Duplicate prizes will be awarded in event of ties.

Skill in detection, DETECTIVE ABILITY, is the one requirement necessary to win a prize.

Only letters postmarked before March 18, 1941, will be considered by the judges of this contest.

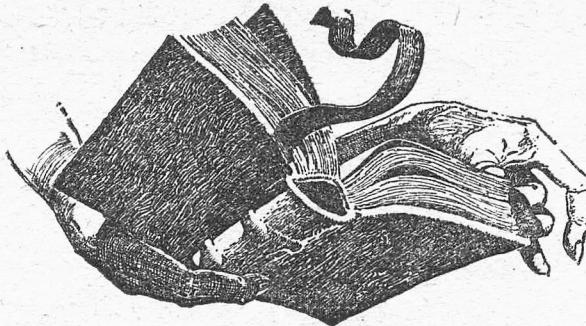
No employee of Street & Smith, or any relative of an employee of Street & Smith, may compete for these prizes.

All letters must be submitted with the understanding that the decision of the judges will be accepted as final and that all letters become the property of Street & Smith.

THE JUDGES

R. B. Miller	Editor, Detective Story
Frank Gruber	Author
Richard Burke	Author

6 BEHIND THE MURDERS



AS we go to press, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp. has already bought the motion-picture rights to "The Dead Take No Bows," by Richard Burke (page 61). And Houghton Mifflin Co. has the script scheduled for spring publication as a book. In view of this solid, Grade-A recognition, we thought you might like to know something about this writer, new to Detective Story. Therefore, we asked Mr. Burke to speak for himself, Richard . . . and he does so herewith:

I WAS born in Los Angeles just before the Great Migration from Iowa set in. Also a little before the Chamber of Commerce had succeeded in getting all its members to come to meeting with collars and neckties.

"I went to school up to the seventh grade, at which period I decided to go to sea as a cabin boy on sugar-carrying windjammers. Then I returned to Los Angeles, got into the printing business and eventually—drama!

THE theater in New York claimed me. Beginning in Shakespearean repertoire. I graduated into musical comedy in a truly excellent role—the latter portion, so to speak, of a horse. I kept on with the theater until my public gave out on me and left me stranded.

"Once more the printing business got me. A nice job loomed up in Shanghai. So did I, and stayed two years. Had a very good time, got mixed up in, and shot at, and hit in the wrist, in the Chinese Revolution—No. 1

STARTED back to New York when I finally had enough of the Orient. "The war came on, but would have no part of me because of former wounds and deficient eyes.

"Returned to New York after the war and got tangled up in a photographic career. Theatrical stuff, beautiful girls and nice going.

"The studio business folded up, and then I started to write.

THIS brings me up to now, when life finds me retired to the serenity of Connecticut, there to plot murder without fear of the law, or anything else. Well, hardly anything else. There are always the readers' minds!

DEATH ON POST # 7

by FRANK GRUBER

Author of

The French Key, The Laughing Fox, The Talking Clock,
The Hungry Dog, etc., etc.

● ATTENTION, SERVICE MEN! One of the seventeen
prizes offered for this story's solution can be yours!
Who was responsible for DEATH ON POST # 7?
Who owned the secret radio? Can you tell us?

PART ONE

I.

WHEN That Man drew Number 158 out of the old kettle, it didn't worry Danny Higgins one bit. He was right all the way down the line. He'd voted the straight ticket and he made book for some of the best people in the city. Besides which, his Uncle Oscar—Oskey Higgins—was captain of the 11th Precinct.

No, sir, they weren't going to draft Danny Higgins.

So when they blew the bugle that first morning, Danny pulled the blankets over his head and muttered, "Let the damn place burn down."

A moment later a rough hand tore the blankets away and a voice resembling that of Barnacle Bill, the sailor, roared into his ear: "Rise and shine, recruit!"

Danny blinked at the lantern-jawed soldier, who had three stripes and a diamond on his shirt sleeve.

"Scram, buddy!" he demanded. "Can't a man sleep around here without everybody making a racket?"

An unholy light glowed in the eyes of the man with the three stripes and the diamond on his shirt. "Jeepers, mister," he said in a tense, subdued tone. "I didn't mean to wake you up. Cripes, no! If I'd known it was you, I'd have brought you your breakfast in bed, you . . . !" The words he said from that point on brought Danny Higgins wide-awake.

He peeled bushels of potatoes that day. He washed thousands of dishes and he mopped acres of floors. He waited on tables in the mess hall and he washed some more dishes. He kept that up until around nine o'clock in the evening and then they turned off the lights before he could even undress for bed.

The second day he became an orderly—a latrine orderly. Along about the middle of the afternoon the man with the stripes and the diamond on his shirt came downstairs and said to Danny:

"Well, how do you like the army now, buddy?"

Danny told him. The top sergeant listened with interest until Danny was out of breath, then he smiled pleasantly and swung. The blow didn't hurt. You don't feel a 75 either if it explodes right over your head.

But Danny Higgins had bad dreams. A bunch of blacksmiths were using his head for an anvil. After a while they got tired and a squad of little red devils took their places. Their miniature hammers didn't hurt as much as the sledges of the smithies, but there were more of them and when they stopped with their hammers and began poking little pitchforks into Danny, he didn't like it at all. He opened his eyes and the little red devils disappeared. But streaks of pain still lanced through his head.

He lay still for a moment, staring at the ceiling of the latrine. So this was the army! Well, they could have it. He, Danny Higgins was getting out. Right now!

He climbed to his knees and paused there while he shook his head to clear away some of the buzzing. Then he gained his feet.

For a moment he debated whether he should go up to the squad room and change from his dungarees to the crummy O. D.'s they'd dished him out just two days ago.

He decided on the dungarees. He wouldn't have to go farther than Cow Hollow, just outside the reservation gates. There were a dozen fellows out there who'd help him—fellows he'd done favors for in the past.

He left the latrine by the rear door, stepping into a short, darkened corridor off which were storerooms. The corridor was dark, but a crack of light seeped through one of the storeroom doors that wasn't entirely closed. Danny's eyes went automatically to the crack as he passed. He stopped and put his eye to it.

The door was jerked open in his face, the light inside winked out—and

lights exploded in Danny's head. *For the second time within ten minutes.*

He went down, but this time he didn't go out. Not entirely. He heard feet pound up the corridor and clatter on the stairs.

Rage and humiliation brought Danny to his feet. He continued to the end of the corridor, climbed the stairs and burst into the kitchen. A cook and several K. P.'s stared at him. Danny had no word for them. He passed through the kitchen and left the barracks.

He did not even look back. He was through with the army. He walked to the end of the alley, head hunched on shoulders, hands thrust savagely into the pockets of his dungarees.

He turned left into a company street and almost bumped into a soldier. He muttered an apology and started past, but the soldier snapped at him.

"Hold on there!"

The authoritative note in the soldier's tone stopped Danny. He turned and his eyes caught polished leather boots. Boots spelled officer to Danny, but in his present mood he didn't give a damn if the officer was the commanding general himself.

"Ten-shun!" snapped the officer. "Don't you know enough to salute an officer?"

Danny's eyes finally came up to meet the officer's face. Then they almost popped from his head.

"Shannon!" he gasped.

The officer inhaled softly. "Danny Higgins!" Then uncontrollable laughter shook him. "Danny Higgins! They caught Danny Higgins. There is justice, after all."

"Cut it, Shannon," snarled Danny Higgins. "It ain't funny. Not to me. Anyway, I'm shaking the army. They can't knock me around. I don't have to take it."

Shannon's steel-blue eyes narrowed. "What're you talking about, Danny? You've got a year to go. There isn't anything you can do to get out a day sooner. You ought to know that. You probably pulled all the wires you could trying to keep out—and it didn't do you any good."

"They double-crossed me," Danny said passionately. "They told me I'd get a soft job, and look what they've had me doing—washing dishes and peeling potatoes. And cleaning toilets! Then on top of that they belt me around."

"Who did?"

"That lousy straw boss, the one they call Sergeant Slattery."

"He hit you?"

"D'you think I got this blinker playing post office?"

"Noncoms don't hit privates in the army officially, Danny. They're not allowed to. You must have done something to provoke him."

"I didn't do anything except tell him what I thought of this man's army. That's all. Then he popped me."

"Oh!" Shannon said in relief. "It was unofficial, then. That's different."

"Oh, is it? And what about the other bird who hit me? The one with his private radio down in the basement. I didn't say a damn thing to *him*."

Shannon looked quizzically at Danny. "What do you mean, private radio in the basement?"

Danny sniffed. "I caught him gold-bricking down in the potato cellar."

Shannon reached out and gripped Danny's hand. "Tell me some more. Was he a noncom?"

"A noncommissioned officer? Corporals and sergeants are noncommissioned officers, aren't they? A lieutenant is a commissioned officer." Danny Higgins suddenly drew back. "Cripes, *you're* an officer."

"That's right. By the grace of the president and Congress, I'm an officer. A first lieutenant."

"Only a lieutenant? Hell, you were a lieutenant on the force. A homicide lieutenant ought to be a general in the army. At least a captain."

Lieutenant Shannon laughed. "You always were good for a laugh, Danny. Now look, I'm interested in this radio you mentioned. I want you to show it to me."

"Once a cop always a cop," Danny Higgins said disgustedly. "Only you're not a cop any more. So you can't drag me down to headquarters."

"I'm afraid I can, Danny," Lieutenant Shannon said. "And I don't even need a warrant in the army. Come along, Danny."

"I won't," Danny said stubbornly. "I'm quitting the army. I told you—"

"Cut it, Danny!" Lieutenant Shannon snapped. "You can't quit the army. If you run away, it's desertion. In wartime they shoot deserters."

"Huh?"

"And in peacetime the minimum sentence is two years in a military prison. This being a national emergency, you'll probably get five years."

A slow expression of horror crept into Danny Higgins' eyes. "You mean I got to stick it out a whole year?"

"Of course. It'll do you good. A year in the army may knock some of those crazy ideas out of your thick skull. You were heading down the wrong street fast, Danny. That mob you ran with—they'll all wind up behind the eight ball. Now, come along with me. I want to see that radio."

Danny Higgins shrugged helplessly and followed Lieutenant Shannon back to the barracks that housed the two hundred and fifty men of Company G.

Danny led the way into the kitchen, where one of the K. P.'s cried out, "Ten-shun!" and everyone, including the cook, clicked heels and stood as stiff as Springfield rifles until Shannon said, "At ease, men."

Going down to the basement, Shannon pressed the electric-light switch. In the corridor, he looked inquiringly at Danny.

Danny pulled open the door of the potato storeroom. Then he exclaimed in chagrin, "It's gone, Shannon."

Lieutenant Shannon sent a swift glance about the room, taking in the sacks of potatoes. Then he stooped quickly and examined the floor. Finally he nodded and straightened.

"All right, Danny, he's gone."

"You don't think I saw anyone here?"

"Oh, yes, I believe you, Danny. Now, describe him."

"Huh? He was just a . . . a soldier. I didn't get a look at his face. It was almost dark in here."

"You don't even know then if he was a private or a noncom?"

"Uh-huh, but I can tell you one thing. He had a wallop as hard as that straw boss."

"Sergeant Slattery? Hm-m-m, I know Slattery. He's the toughest top sergeant in the regiment. If the man hit you as hard as Slattery did, he must be a giant."

"I'm thinking maybe it was Slattery himself," said Danny sullenly.

"No," Shannon said decisively. "It couldn't have been Slattery. He's been in the army for fourteen years. No one who's been in the army that long and who came up the hard way would be a—would be the second man who hit you."

"Why not?" Danny asked truculently.

Lieutenant Shannon sighed wearily. "Because he wouldn't. Take my word for that, Danny. And look, I want to give you some advice. It'll save you a lot of trouble in this army. Take that chip off your shoulder. A buck private is the lowest form of humanity. You may have been a big shot on the outside, but here in the army you're nothing. Nothing at all. A first-class private who was a garbage man in civilian life ranks you. Remember that, Danny. And another thing—remember to say 'sir' to an officer."

"You mean you, Shannon?"

Shannon smiled. "That's a good place to start."

Danny Higgins sneered. "How the hell'd you get to be an officer and me only a private?"

"Why, Danny, I happen to have held a commission in the reserves. Besides which I put in about four years in the National Guard. I spent one night every week at the armory while you were spending your time in pool-rooms. Catch on, Danny?"

"I catch. And you know what? I'm going to be an officer myself! What do I have to be to rank this guy Slattery?"

Shannon measured him. "A second lieutenant."

"O. K., that's what I'll be, then. And it won't take me any fourteen years. I'll do it before my year's up. You watch."

"I will, Danny. And now I've got to go. But look—don't say anything about this man you saw here with the radio. Promise me that, Danny."

"O. K., Shan—sir!"

II.

COLONEL RICHARD JORDAN graduated from West Point in 1917. He became a company commander before going to France and before it ended, a year later, he wore the silver leaves of a lieutenant colonel.

And then, with demobilization, he was reduced to the rank he had acquired upon graduation from the academy. He didn't become a first lieutenant until 1923. Sixteen years later he reached the rank he had possessed temporarily during the World War. When the Selective Service Act came along he became full colonel and commandant of one of the finest army posts in the country—the Presidio of San Francisco. He was only forty-five now. In the normal course of events, he might have been retired in nineteen years as full colonel. Now he was one of the selected officers, and if no misfortune befell him, he might, because of his brilliant record, in time become a corps commander. There are only nine corps commanders in the entire army.

Today he sat in his office at post headquarters and tapped the telegram that an aid had just delivered. He shook his head and called to the orderly who stood just outside the door. When the man came in and clicked his heels at attention, Jordan said:

"Orderly, give my compliments to Captains Herbert, Ash and Willis and tell them that I want to see them at once. On your way out, ask Lieutenant Shannon to come in."

Lieutenant Shannon entered a moment later. The colonel returned his salute and regarded him thoughtfully. He saw a lean man, six feet tall, whose trim figure belied his 185 pounds. Unconsciously, the colonel nodded approval.

"Lieutenant Shannon," he said, "you were a police detective in civilian life, I believe."

"That's right, sir," replied Lieutenant Shannon. "Homicide."

"I know. I'm familiar with your work through the newspapers. You belonged to the modern school of policemen—but I've heard that you forget that once in a while." The colonel's eyes twinkled. "The Irish in you."

Lieutenant Shannon made no comment to that, but he relaxed visibly.

"Colonel Richardson has told me about you. He considers you the most brilliant acquisition to G-2 in a good many years. That's why I've asked you here. In a few minutes the commanders of Companies A, C and G will arrive, but before they get here I want to tell you what I'm going to tell them." He looked down at the telegram on his desk. "Have you ever heard of a man named James Marsh?"

"The powder expert?" Shannon asked cautiously.

"Yes. I believe he spent some years with the Achilles Powder Co. Well, he's invented a new type of gunpowder. A powder which—if it comes up to Marsh's claims—makes obsolete the powder of every army in the world. According to Marsh, this powder will increase the velocity and pene-

trating power of every shell used in warfare, from the .45-caliber revolver cartridge to the 16-inch navy gun. Have you any idea what that would mean, lieutenant?"

"Why," said Shannon slowly, "it will mean that the country possessing it will nullify all the armament of the opposing powers—tanks, armored cars, airplanes, ships—"

Colonel Jordan nodded. "That's right—if the powder is as good as Marsh claims. Well, Marsh is coming here. He's going to make his final tests on this reservation. I have orders from Washington to turn over the facilities of the post and—" He paused and looked sharply at the lieutenant from Military Intelligence.

"—and if the powder works, it must remain the exclusive property of this country. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I'll tell Colonel Richardson then that you're on special duty for the duration of Marsh's stay at the post."

"Thank you, sir. Now, there's something I'd like to report. I have reason to believe that there's an unauthorized radio transmission set in this camp."

The colonel blinked. "What makes you think that, lieutenant?"

Quickly Shannon told of his meeting with Danny Higgins and his investigation of the potato cellar in the barracks of Company G. "The man wasn't lying, sir," he finished. "There's a thick layer of dust in that store-room, and I distinctly made out the mark of wire uncoiled on the floor. There was no reason for wire to be in that cellar."

The colonel frowned. "I don't like that, lieutenant. I don't like it at all. That means you'll have to be doubly cautious."

"I know. I'll probably need assistance. I wonder if I could have this man Higgins assigned to help me."

"From what you told me of him, I wouldn't imagine he'd be of any help. An unsavory character?"

"Oh, not at all. Danny Higgins has some peculiar qualities that may be of invaluable help to me."

"Then get him. Have him assigned to you as an orderly. And requisition anyone else you need."

The orderly came into the office and saluted smartly.

"Sir, Captains Herbert, Ash and Willis wish to pay their respects."

"Have them come in—and then close the door."

The officers entered and Colonel Jordan got up and came around his desk. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said after he had exchanged salutes. "This is Lieutenant Shannon, of G-2. I've just assigned him to special duty, which concerns you gentlemen in a way."

He smiled at the company commanders. "I suppose you captains are proud of having in your companies the men who composed the rifle team that won the matches at Camp Perry? Of course! And it is because of that

that we are being honored with the presence at this camp of James Marsh, who, by order of the secretary of war, will arrive here tomorrow to complete his tests with the new powder of which you may have heard rumors. Your rifle team is going to test it. And all of us—Heaven help us!—are at the mercy of this inventive genius as long as he remains here. I have orders to that effect."

Captain Ash, of Company G, let out a groan. "I had an inventor palmed off on me when I was stationed at Yuma, Arizona, colonel. He had a sand shoe for mules so they could travel in desert country. Isn't there a regulation that an officer can be compelled to have only one inventor in a ten-year period?"

Colonel Jordan chuckled, then tried to look stern. "Marsh comes well recommended, and he *has* a good background. I don't like inventors myself, but there's nothing I can do about this one. I merely brought you here to ask you to relieve your rifle experts of their duties and to ask you to conceal your feelings as much as possible if Marsh should become a little . . . er . . . obstreperous. He *has*—"

He stopped as knuckles rapped on the door. "Come in!"

The orderly opened the door. "Beg your pardon, sir, but we've just received a phone call from the Lombard gate that Mr. Marsh has arrived—"

"Damn!" exclaimed the colonel. "He wasn't supposed to get here until tomorrow."

"And there's been a little difficulty, sir," the orderly continued. "The gate guard is holding Mr. Marsh for your orders."

Colonel Jordan winced. "Lieutenant Shannon, will you run down there and take charge of Mr. Marsh? Bring him here—no, it's lunch time. Bring him to my house. We'll all have lunch there. He may be a little upset over this incident."

Outside post headquarters stood an olive-drab car with an eagle on the windshield. Shannon opened the door and stepped in. "Colonel's order, chauffeur. Drive to the Lombard gates as fast as you can."

The chauffeur touched his cap and shifted into gear. The car leaped forward so suddenly Shannon was slammed back against the cushions.

It was a mile and a half to the gates. The military car made it in something over a minute. New York taxicab drivers are sissies in comparison with the average army chauffeur—particularly those who sport the post commander's insignia and are immune.

The car was braked as suddenly as it had been started, and Shannon almost tumbled out of it. When he regained his equilibrium he started toward the gate—and stopped.

The most decrepit-looking truck that had ever traveled under its own power blocked the reservation gate. It was loaded high with all sorts of paraphernalia, lathes, pulleys, drill presses, milling machines, as well as a number of boxes and barrels.

That wasn't what had halted Shannon, however. It was the absence

of the gate guard and the sight of the beast that stood snarling at the closed door of the gate house.

The creature was probably a dog, but it looked more like a werewolf. It had shepherd blood if the long body and the coarse hair meant anything. But its head looked like a chow dog's. Its tail—it was a tail—might have belonged to a jackass.

"Hello, the guardhouse!" Shannon called.

A soldier stuck his head out of a window next to the door and drew it in again quickly as the dog leaped up.

A voice came from inside:

"We got a guy here claims he's a pal of the colonel's, but we dasn't open the door on account of his mutt. I wanna know can we shoot the dog."

"No!" exclaimed Shannon angrily. "Open that door and release Mr. Marsh."

There was a moment's hesitation, then the gate-house door was opened and an angry, red-faced man in civilian clothes stepped out. "Down, Augie!" he snapped at the dog, then glared at Lieutenant Shannon.

"Are you the commander of these men?"

Lieutenant Shannon winced as he advanced upon the inventor. Marsh was about fifty. He had a three days' growth of beard and had evidently slept in his clothing, coat and trousers of which did not match. He wore no hat, and his unruly black hair was tinged with gray.

Shannon said: "I'm Lieutenant Shannon. Colonel Jordan has asked me to bring you to his house for lunch. I'll drive you over in the staff car and the chauffeur can bring your truck."

"What?" cried Marsh. "Trust my formulas and implements to a stupid soldier?"

Shannon's nostrils flared a little. "Then I'll ride with you in your truck."

"Very well," said Marsh, somewhat mollified. "How far is it?"

"Almost two miles to the colonel's house. About half that far to headquarters." Shannon signaled to Colonel Jordan's chauffeur that he would ride with Marsh, then climbed into the cab of the truck.

Marsh went around to the driver's seat, allowing the mongrel dog to leap in ahead of him. The animal growled deep in its throat as it sniffed Shannon.

"It's all right," said Marsh gruffly. "He won't bite you—now!"

He started the motor of the truck and shifted into gear. The vehicle groaned and shivered and began to move.

"Straight ahead until we reach the parade ground," Shannon directed, "then turn left to Infantry Terrace."

III.

AFTER Lieutenant Shannon left Danny Higgins, the former bookie returned to the latrines and hosed down the concrete floor. Finished with that

little task, he went up to his squad room on the first floor of the barracks. The room overlooked the parade ground, on which several infantry companies were even now engaged in close-order drill.

The squad room was empty except for himself, and he watched the drilling through the windows. A slow grin crossed his face after a few minutes.

"Maybe I'd just as soon clean toilets as drill," he muttered. "That looks like hard work. I think I'll try for K. P. tomorrow."

He went to his iron cot and threw himself upon it for an hour or so of bunk fatigue before the soldiers were recalled from drill.

He had scarcely closed his eyes when he heard hard heels on the wooden floor and, looking up, saw Sergeant Slattery approaching. Danny groaned and swung his feet to the floor.

"You lay a hand on me again," he said to the sergeant, "and I'll cold-cock you."

"Tut-tut, me lad," chuckled Sergeant Slattery. "I don't hold no hard feelings. How d'you like the army now?"

It was the same question he had asked Danny before the previous hostilities, and Danny almost fell into the same trap. He caught himself, however, and grinned. "Swell. I'm figuring on working for a promotion. I want to be a lieutenant before my hitch is up."

"Ah, a lieutenant it is you want to be? Sure, and then you'd rank me."

"That's the idea."

"Good. But in the meantime, I thought I'd tell you that I was puttin' you on guard duty tonight."

Danny looked uncomfortably at the top sergeant. "That's bad, I suppose?"

"Oh, no"—sarcastically. "You sleep most of the night—except for the little while you walk post. A mere two hours at a stretch. You got to take guard duty once in a while, and I thought you wouldn't mind it today on account of it's pay day and the soldiers don't like guard on pay day. You bein' a recruit without no pay comin', you shouldn't mind it."

"No," said Danny Higgins bitterly. "I don't mind it at all. What do I guard?"

Sergeant Slattery shrugged. "I dunno. I'm not the commander of the guard. But, after chow, you fall out with the other recruits and learn the front end of a rifle from the back so you don't shoot off your toes while you're walking post tonight."

Chuckling, the sergeant walked off. At the door of the squad room he stopped. "You done a grand job with the latrines, recruit. I never saw a toilet cleaned better."

The army believes in being thorough. Learning the fundamentals of the Springfield rifle, under the tutelage of a cobra-tongued corporal, occupied the entire afternoon—until after four o'clock. Then Danny was informed that he had fifteen minutes before guard mount.

During the afternoon, G Company was paid, and when Danny entered the squad room he saw something that filled his heart with gladness—a mammoth crap game going on in the big room.

"Oh, Lord," he breathed softly. "And me on guard!"

A blanket had been spread in the center of the floor, and at least forty soldiers were crowded around it on their knees. Danny Higgins threw his rifle upon his cot and bucked the solid line of soldiers.

Frantically he searched his pockets, only to recall that he had less than two dollars on his person. He hadn't figured it worth while to bring any money with him when he had been inducted into the service.

"They give you everything," he had been told.

And here was the biggest crap game he had ever seen in his life, and he had—he counted it—one dollar and sixty cents.

Using his elbows and knees, he fought his way to the blanket.

"I'll let the eight bucks ride," exclaimed an excited soldier.

Money showered upon the blanket from all sides, and the gamekeeper—a self-appointed gamekeeper who dragged down a quarter on every third and fifth pass because of his ingenuity—had to throw back some of the money.

"Shoot," he ordered laconically.

The shooter picked up a pair of green dice and rattled them lustily in his hand. He rolled them out and they stopped at six.

"A dollar he doesn't six," cried Danny.

"Bet," said the soldier at his right elbow.

The man with the dice scooped up the celluloid cubes and promptly rolled out a six.

"I'm dragging down," he cried. "I'm shooting a buck."

"I got sixty cents of it," said Danny.

The gamekeeper called Danny a dirty name. "No chicken feed in this game. Besides, you weren't on him before. Last man has the privilege."

"Sixty cents he doesn't pass," cried Danny, unperturbed. "Sixty cents he's wrong."

A heavy hand tapped Danny's shoulder. "You, recruit, you're only holding up guard mount, that's all."

Reluctantly, Danny got to his feet. The soldier with the rifle waited while Danny got his own piece and then he herded him out to the parade ground across from the barracks.

About twenty men were lined up in a double rank. A corporal called them to attention, then gave the order: "Inspection, arms!" which Danny muffed. He also got the subsequent maneuvers wrong, and earned some choice remarks. But finally the detail got to the guardhouse, where the old guard was relieved, and Danny drew Post #7 of the third relief.

He learned that this meant he would walk post from nine thirty to eleven thirty in the evening, and again from three thirty to five thirty in the morning. In between he was supposed to stay in the guardhouse with the other sentries and was not allowed to remove any of his clothing.

Danny went to sleep in the guard room along about nine o'clock. It seemed but a moment before the corporal of the guard was shaking him, and Danny, shivering from the evening chill, got his rifle and went outside.

The corporal got together his relief—eight men—and took them off to relieve the second relief. They marched awkwardly a block down the main, asphalted road, then turned left and narrow street lined with warehouses.

Finally they were challenged by tified himself, then said: "Private

Danny stepped out and faced the sentry, bringing his rifle clumsily to "port arms," as he had been instructed.

"This is Post #7," recited the sentry being relieved. "It starts at this point and goes back here, behind the warehouses, to the edge of the hospital grounds, then due west to the cavalry stables, then back here. General orders cover."

"Post!" snapped the corporal.

The relieved sentry fell into line, and the relief, marching off, left Danny Higgins alone for his first tour of guard duty.

He looked at the deserted warehouses and the black cavern that was the alley he was supposed to patrol. Its shadows became lurking shapes that waited with savage anticipation. He shivered. So now he was a night watchman—with probably the loneliest beat in the world.

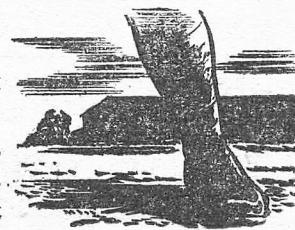
He shouldered his rifle and ventured into the dark alley. The gloom was so thick he had to feel his way, but after a while he became accustomed to it and managed reasonably well.

A lone block away he came to a dead-end wall beyond which were the hospital grounds. He turned left, and after a while came to the paved road which intersected his post. He scowled.

It would have been a lot easier—and more cheerful—to just walk up and down the paved road in the middle of Post #7 rather than tour the dark alleys. There were lights on the main street.

He continued on to the second alley, however, and brightened as he saw a light halfway down. The light came from a small window about six feet from the ground.

a sentry. The corporal iden- Higgins, you're Post #7."



Unabashed, Danny went up to the window and, standing on his toes, peeked in. He saw a middle-aged man in civilian clothes mixing something in a large bowl. There was a scowl on the man's face.

At the man's feet lay a huge dog, and even as Danny caught sight of it the animal leaped up and rushed for the window at which Danny was peering in.

Danny promptly resumed walking his post, leaving the warehouse behind him with considerable alacrity.

When he reached the starting point of Post #7 Danny looked at his watch and saw that the circuit had taken him approximately fifteen minutes. That meant that he would have to make eight rounds in his two-hour tour of duty.

The light in the warehouse was out on his second round, but Danny, hearing the dog barking outside, walked quickly past the building.

The third time around the light was on, but the dog was silent. On the fourth circuit the light was still on, but the dog was again silent. Danny, looking at the square of yellow light, stepped on something large and yielding.

An involuntary shudder ran through him and he leaped six feet past the bundle on the ground. He brought his rifle down to the ready and slipped off the safety as he had been instructed only that afternoon.

He could distinctly make out the shadow on the ground. It looked like — a man.

Danny asked hoarsely: "Who's there?"

The figure on the ground made no reply. Danny challenged. "What are you doing down there?"

No reply.

Danny backed off another half a dozen feet and, gripping his rifle with one hand, fished a match out of his pocket. He struck it on the stock of his rifle.

He dropped the match instantly and yelled at the top of his lungs: "Corporal of the guard—Post #7! Corporal of the guard—Post #7!"

Then he began running.

At the end of his post, under a bright arc light, he stopped and began shouting again. "Corporal of the guard—Post #7!"

In the distance, accoutrements clanked and hard heels clicked upon the pavement. Danny Higgins kept up his yelling until he saw the corporal and



a half squad of soldiers coming at double time.

When they came up, he cried: "There's a dead man down here."

The corporal drew up, scowling. "Oh, it's you, Higgins. The top warned me you were a cut-up."

"I tell you there's a dead man down here," Higgins said doggedly. "Down here by the warehouse where the civilian's fooling around with a big dog."

The corporal exclaimed. "Mr. Marsh, the inventor! Cripes!"

He flicked on a large flashlight and began running down the alley. Higgins and the other sentries followed. The light in the window was still on, and as the group approached, Marsh and his huge dog came out of the warehouse. The inventor carried an electric lantern which, with the aid of the corporal's flashlight, shed sufficient light upon the alley to pick out the huddle on the ground.

"Gawd!" cried the corporal of the guard as he focused his torch upon the body. "It's Haichek, the colonel's dog robber! And he's croaked."

"What's the matter with that man?" snapped James Marsh. "Is he drunk?"

He stopped a dozen feet from the dead man. One hand gripped his electric lantern and the other the collar on his shaggy dog. The beast was growling fiercely.

The corporal was making an examination. "He's dead. He's . . . he's had a bayonet stuck through his back."

He got suddenly to his feet. "Bowers, Young! Stand guard here. Watch Higgins, too. Don't let anyone touch anything. Needham, you come with me."

"Wait a minute, sergeant!" cried Marsh, unknowingly promoting the corporal of the guard. "You can't leave my laboratory unprotected. Not after what's happened. I want an armed man inside with me and another outside. Colonel Jordan has issued orders that I'm to have anything I want."

The corporal apparently didn't know about that, but decided not to take any chances. "Young," he said. "You go inside with Mr. Marsh. Keep your rifle ready. Higgins, I'm relieving you from this post. Come with me. Snappy!"

IV.

LIEUTENANT SHANNON was playing billiards in the Officers' Club when the telephone call came. A moment later he was tearing down the stairs and cutting across the parade ground toward the guardhouse.

The sentry on Post #1 in front of the guardhouse challenged him, but the sergeant of the guard, on the veranda, came running down the stairs.

"A man's been murdered, sir, on Post #7."

"That's what you said over the telephone," Shannon said impatiently. "Where's Post #7?"

"Down by the warehouse. I'll show you. I've sent for the officer of

the day. I think that's him coming now."

Headlights of a car swerved around the turn in front of the infantry barracks and swooped down upon the guardhouse. The limousine screeched to a stop and Captain Willis of C Company stuck his head out of the car.

"Lieutenant Shannon! Jump in. Sergeant, where is it?"

"Post #7, sir. It's—"

Neither Shannon, nor Captain Willis heard the rest. The car was roaring away again. A few moments later it stopped a short distance from where the body of Haichek still lay as it had been discovered.

The sentries sprang to attention, but Captain Willis put them at ease. He kept at a distance from the dead man, however.

Shannon approached and dropped to his knees beside the dead man. A quick examination of the body was enough. Then he straightened and borrowed a flashlight from one of the sentries. With it he examined the ground carefully, moving toward the lighted window of the warehouse in which James Marsh had set up his laboratory. As he neared the window, the rear door burst open and the inventor came out.

"Ah, Lieutenant Shannon!" he cried. "It's about time. I want to know what's going on here."

Shannon stiffened as he saw Marsh. Then he quickly shook his head. "I'd like to know what's been going on, Mr. Marsh."

"I don't know a thing," the powder expert declared. "I set up shop here this afternoon and I've been working ever since. I know that I've been spied upon all evening. Augie was restless. He'd bark every fifteen minutes or so."

"Probably at the sentries making their rounds."

Marsh scowled. "I didn't want any sentries here. Augie's enough of a watchman for me. I can defend myself. Who's that—over there?"

"A man named Haichek. I'm afraid he's been killed."

"How?"

"A bayonet. Is . . . er . . . everything all right inside?"

"Eh? Of course. Somebody's been spying on me, but that didn't do them any good. I kept the doors locked on the inside. No one could have got in. Not alive."

"You're armed, Mr. Marsh?"

"Of course I'm armed," snapped Marsh. "And I've been handling guns all my life. Well, get rid of these men so I can get back to my work. I've got to get the cartridges ready for the tests tomorrow."

"You're making them for tomorrow? Even now?"

"Why not? I didn't kill that man. I don't even know him."

Shannon stepped closer so the soldiers about could not hear his words. "He was Colonel Jordan's orderly. I was wondering if he could have overheard anything today?"

"What? I didn't give out my formula, did I? That's my own secret. It's going to stay my secret—until the government accepts—or rejects—my powder."

Shannon nodded. "Very well, sir, but in view of what's happened, I wonder if you wouldn't be safer—I mean, more comfortable at the Officers' Club. This warehouse is pretty far off from the center of things."

"It suits me. As I said, no one's going to break in on me. Not as long as Augie's alive—and I can lift a gun. You might repeat that out loud. A warning. Good night, sir!" And with that the inventor slammed into the warehouse. A moment later the door was opened and the sentry who had gone in with him a while ago stepped out. Shannon heard a latch being slammed home on the door.

He turned away; then, exclaiming softly, dropped to the ground and examined it closely with his flashlight. Finally he got up and approached Captain Willis.

"Sir, as officer of the day I want you to detail two men here—one of them a noncom to watch this little patch of ground under the window. I don't want anyone to obliterate the footprints on the ground. Absolutely no one—not even Mr. Marsh inside."

"Very well, lieutenant. Corporal!"

DANNY HIGGINS had been relieved of his rifle and sidearms and was sitting in the little room of the commander of the guard when Lieutenant Shannon came in. The latter made a quick signal to Danny, then said, briskly: "Is this the sentry, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir," replied the sergeant, who was acting commander of the guard. "I thought it best to relieve him and post a supernumerary in his place."

Shannon nodded. "I'd like to question him—privately, sergeant."

The sergeant saluted and stepped out of the room. Shannon waited until the door was firmly closed, then turned to Danny Higgins.

"All right, Danny, let's have it."

"You got it, Shan—Lieutenant Shannon. I was walking post and all of a sudden I stepped on this fellow. I yelled for the corporal of the guard and when he came he said I was under arrest. What the hell for? For finding a stiff?"

"You're not under arrest—yet. And you haven't told a thing. I want every detail of your guard tour. Everything you saw or did. Begin at the beginning and don't miss a thing."

"I don't know anything. You saw the damn post they put me on—the back side of the world. I didn't see a damn thing and didn't hear anything—until I stepped on this guy."

"He was lying right in the middle of the alley, Danny. That wasn't your first time around, was it?"

"Uh-huh. I went around half a dozen times."

"You mean that literally—six times?"

Danny scowled. "No. Let's see. I timed it. Took me fifteen minutes each time around. Yeah, it was the fourth trip. The first three times I

didn't see anything."

"Absolutely nothing?"

Danny fidgeted. "Nothing except the guy and his mutt."

"Ah! When did you see him?"

"Well, the first time around. You see, it was as black as the inside of an eight ball in that alley until I saw the light in his window. Naturally, I took a quick peek inside. That's when I saw him and the mutt. What the hell's a civilian doing out here, anyway?"

"That's another story, Danny. Take my word for it, however, that Marsh has a right in that building. All right, you peeked through the window and saw him. What was he doing?"

"Mixing something in a bowl. Maybe a rabbit stew."

"What was he doing the second time you looked in?"

Danny sneered. "Copper tricks, huh? I didn't look in the second time. The window was dark."

"He'd gone to bed?"

"No, because the light was on again the next time."

"It was out on your second trip and on the third? What about the last time?"

"Still on."

Lieutenant Shannon frowned. "You're sure of that? The light was on the first, third and fourth times—but you didn't find the body until the last trip."

"That's right."

"Couldn't you have missed it on the first trips? It's pretty dark in that alley."

Danny rubbed his chin. "It's dark, all right, but you remember the body was lying crosswise in the alley. I'd have had to detour around it—and I wasn't detouring around anything in those alleys. I was going straight down the middle. I know *that!*"

"Then the body couldn't have been there until the last trip. That narrows down the time to between ten fifteen and ten thirty. Danny, I'm glad to say that you're in the clear on this."

"That's decent of you, lieutenant," said Danny sarcastically, "but how do you know?"

"Your bayonet. I examined it before I came in here. It hasn't any bloodstains on it."

"That's just dandy. So if you don't mind, I'll go back and finish my little stretch of guard duty so I can grab some shut-eye."

"You won't have to go back, Danny. The commander of the guard has put the supernumerary on your post. I imagine he'll let you go back to your barracks."

Danny's eyes lighted up for an instant, then clouded. "I'd just as soon hang around here."

The lieutenant pursed up his lips. "Look, Danny, I want you to do

something for me. Taps has sounded and the men are supposed to be in their beds, but . . . ah . . . well, this is pay day, and I imagine all is not what it seems. So—I'd like for you to talk to the men. Look them over and talk. Hm-m-m—a little detective work."

"For you, Shannon? I thought you were just a looey in the army—not a copper?"

"In a way, I'm both, Danny. You see, I'm in the Intelligence Department. You might call it the equivalent of the police department."

"I thought so," said Danny disgustedly. "And you want me to be a stool pigeon."

"No, I want you to be my assistant. Not only tonight, but tomorrow—and perhaps for some time afterward."

Danny brightened. "Swell, Shannon. Then, how about lending me a couple of bucks?"

"What for? You can't spend money tonight."

Danny put his tongue in his cheek. "You can't tell."

Shannon grinned, then pulled two dollar bills from his pocket. Danny grabbed them and headed for the door. "I can go now?"

"Yes, I'll fix it with the sergeant. Better get your rifle and side arms."

Three minutes later Danny pounded up the stairs of the darkened barracks that housed G Company. He tried to push open the front door but found it locked.

"Who is it?" a guarded voice inside asked.

"Higgins—Private Higgins. I *live* here."

The door was pulled open and Danny slipped in. The moment the door was closed behind him a light went on. Danny shot a quick glance about the squad room and saw that every window in it was completely covered with a blanket. In the center of the floor, underneath a single electric bulb, the crap game was still going on. The number of players, however, had dwindled to a mere twenty or so.

Danny sprang forward gleefully. "Oh, boy; oh, boy!"

Sergeant Slattery, on hands and knees, looked up at Danny. "Sufferin' eats!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were on guard!"

"I was, but the supernumerary took my place. D'ya mind, sarge?"

"Not any more," Slattery said disgustedly. "I'm beginning to think I underestimated you. Whose dice?"

"Yours, sarge," said the gamekeeper.

The first sergeant dropped a half dollar on the blanket. "Four bits, I shoot."

A player threw down a coin. "Never saw a man so careful of his money. If I made eighty-four bucks a month—"

"If you paid alimony to two women you'd shoot pennies," the sergeant retorted. "Here I go. Crap, dammit!"

"Always double after a crap," Higgins advised.

"Who asked you? I was shooting craps before you were born. Four bits more."

It was covered, and the sergeant promptly threw boxcars. He swore luridly. But this time he doubled his bet. The result was a third crap. His swearing brought a word of caution from the guard at the door. "Not so loud, sergeant!"

"You can't throw more than three craps in a row," Danny said. "Nobody can. Pile it on this time."

The sergeant reached into his breeches pocket and brought out a roll that would have choked a sixteen-inch coast artillery gun. Whistles went up around the blanket. "You been holdin' out on your alimony!"

The sergeant peeled off a five-dollar bill, hesitated, then added another. "Nobody can throw more than three craps," he repeated Danny's advice.

He threw Little Joe, and with his next roll sevened out.

"You squirt," he gritted at Danny Higgins, "I got a good notion—"

"Here's your chance," Danny said impudently. "They're my dice and I shoot two bucks."

"I got it," said the sergeant.

Danny clicked the dice and rolled them out a good four feet. They stopped six-one. "I shoot it!"

"I got it all," snapped Sergeant Slattery.

Danny threw another seven. "And I shoot the eight."

"I'm on him," snarled Slattery.

Danny cackled the dice furiously in his cupped hand, then rolled them so they stopped inches from Slattery's hands. The result was the same as before—a seven.

Slattery scooped up the dice and examined them closely. Then he handed them to the gamekeeper. "How about it, Yoskin?"

Yoskin handed them back promptly. "O. K., my initials are on them."

"All of it," exclaimed Danny Higgins. "Sixteen bucks. How about it, sergeant? You still game?"

"You're damn right I am. But roll them out this time."

"All the way across the blanket—for you, sergeant. How about an eleven this time?"

The dice came up eleven.

Slattery howled and again scooped up the dice and passed them to Yoskin for examination. The latter dropped them and shook his head sadly.

"I've got it," Slattery said desperately.

"Uh-huh," Danny said cheerfully. "Four passes is more than I usually let it ride. Three's my rule. I made an exception just for you. I'm dragging down thirty-one bucks. Shooting a single."

Sergeant Slattery called Danny some bad names but faded the dollar. Danny put his tongue in his cheek, rattled the dice and threw snake eyes!

"For a lousy buck he craps!" yelled the sergeant. "Blank damn the luck, anyway!"

"You won, didn't you?" Danny asked innocently. "There's no pleasing you at all, is there? I'll tell you what. You call it. Tell how much of this you want to fade and I'll shoot it—up to thirty-one sixty."

Perspiration was standing out on Sergeant Slattery's face. "You mean you got into this game with two dollars and sixty cents?"

"Uh-huh. Any rule against that?"

"No, you such and which. All right, I'll fade every damn cent you've got—thirty-one sixty."

"Count it out."

The sergeant did, but as Danny reached for the dice he lunged forward. "Wait a minute; I was a sucker to let it go this far. Yoskin, go dig up that leather cup you use in your big game."

"Oh, you think I'm stackin' the dice, sergeant?" Danny asked innocently. "I'm a recruit. Where would I have learned that?"

"I looked up your service record today. It says you're a bookbinder by vocation. That wouldn't happen to be a *bookmaker*, would it?"

Danny smirked. "Bring on the dice cup, Yoskin, so I can take the sergeant's money and hit the hay."

Ten minutes later the sergeant climbed wearily to his feet. "All right, recruit, you got my money. But tomorrow's another day. Have a good sleep now—I hope not!"

"Whoosh!" said Yoskin, after the top sergeant had left the room. "The sarge certainly hates to lose money."

"He had it coming to him," said Danny Higgins. "He popped me one today."

"Yeah," said one of the other soldiers, "I heard about that. And who was that looey you brung back to the barracks with you?"

"That wasn't a looey," Danny said. "that was my assistant. From the outside."

"And he's a looey now?"

Danny shrugged. "I used to give him hell outside, and now he's boss over me. That's the army, men. Anybody shooting anything?"

V.

AGAIN Danny Higgins burrowed his head deeper into the blanket when he heard reveille. But only for a moment. Recollection seeped into his brain and he threw back the blankets and jumped out of bed. Shivering in the morning chill, he dressed hastily and was outside when the corporals reported their squads all present or accounted for.

In the mess hall, twenty minutes later, everyone knew about the thing that had happened during the night, and Higgins was the center of attention at his table. In a way, he enjoyed it, recounting the finding of the body of Haichek with considerable relish.

"He was a spy, the lousy so-and-so," one soldier commented.

"Yeah, but if he was a spy, who bumped him?" another man asked.
"Another spy, maybe. They always work in pairs."

"What the hell they spyin' around here? All the secret stuff about this camp they could get out of the newspapers."

First Sergeant Slattery, at the noncom's table, caught Danny Higgins' eye and scowled. Danny winced. This was the day after the night before—and the time of reckoning. He couldn't be on K. P. today, because the K. P.'s were assigned the day before, and he would have had to be up before reveille. And he couldn't be latrine orderly again. What dirty job, then, could the sergeant dig up for him?

He finished his breakfast and returned to the squad room, where other soldiers were making up their bunks and cleaning rifles.

Soon drill call sounded across the parade ground, and the soldiers straggled out for the formation. Danny went along and again wondered if he wouldn't rather get a work detail than continue with the fundamentals of the manual of arms of which he had received a smattering the afternoon before.

The corporals reported their men present to the first sergeant, and just as they finished, one of the company's lieutenants came onto the parade ground. Sergeant Slattery reported the company to the lieutenant, and then, facing the company again, snapped:

"Recruits, fall out!"

Danny Higgins swore under his breath. This was it. A dozen men joined him, and Sergeant Slattery took them all in tow and marched them away from the company.

He halted them at the far end of the parade ground. "And now, me lads, I'm going to give you a little instruction in the manual of arms. By rights, a corporal should be doin' this, but I don't hold with these new corporals. They're too easy. You learn my way and you learn for keeps. You, Higgins, step forward!"

Higgins obeyed, and the sergeant, catching hold of him, swung him around so that he faced the other recruits. "Now," he went on, "I'll use Private Higgins for a dummy and show you how you should look. All right, Higgins. 'Ten-shun!'"

Higgins snapped his heels together and stiffened. Sergeant Slattery smiled fondly at the recruits. "Y'see, now, this man thinks he's standin' at attention, and he's doin' it all wrong. Here—throw back your shoulders." He illustrated by slamming Danny Higgins' chest. "And suck in your belly"—a slap in the stomach. "And don't stick out your fanny like that!" Whack!

He circled Private Higgins and tugged and knocked him about. He had a heavy hand, and he was not sparing with it. Higgins fumed. Danny took it for a while, but finally began muttering. Sergeant Slattery whirled on him.

"Did ye say somethin', Private Higgins? Did I hear you mutterin'? Speak up!"

"I said, hit me again and I'll cold-cock you!" Danny gritted between clenched teeth.

Slattery's eyes began to glow. "Talkin' back to a superior, Private Higgins? Well, well, it seems I've got to give you a lesson or two in military etiquette. Stand at attention when I talk to you. Throw back your shoulders!"

"Sergeant Slattery!" called Lieutenant Shannon, approaching across the parade ground.

The sergeant cried, "Ten-shun!" to the recruits, and promptly saluted Lieutenant Shannon.

"I want to speak to Private Higgins a moment," Lieutenant Shannon said. "Come over here, Higgins."

Tight-lipped, Danny Higgins followed Shannon until they were out of earshot of Slattery and his recruits. Then Shannon halted Danny.

"Danny, I need your help. The murder of that man Haichek is presenting complications. I've spent all night checking on him, and the more I learn about him the less I like what I've learned."

"The fellas are saying he was a spy," Danny volunteered.

"Latrine rumors, but—this is one time the rumors may have some truth. Haichek enlisted in the army less than six months ago and immediately began trying to get into headquarters. He bootlicked until he was made an orderly—and he had more money than an enlisted man could save on his pay."

"Speaking of money, lieutenant," said Danny, "here's the two bucks I borrowed from you last night." He pulled a huge handful of bills from his pocket and peeled off a couple of ones.

The lieutenant looked sharply at the money in Danny's hand. "Where'd you get all that? Last night you were—"

"Why," said Danny, closing one eye, "gambling's against army rules, isn't it?"

"You won all that money last night, after taps?"

"Hm-m-m. I'm just a recruit, lieutenant. Some of these soldiers were shooting craps before I was born. That's what a certain top sergeant said to me—"

"I don't want to hear about it," Shannon said hastily. "But I think it's a dirty trick, Danny. First thing I know, you'll be making book out here."

"It's an idea. I'll think it over."

"No, you won't. I'm going to remove you from temptation. Danny, you're going to the guardhouse."

"What for?"

"Because of Haichek. No—wait a minute. Not for any fault of your own. Remember last night I said I wanted you as an assistant? Well, that's it. I've learned that a man named Monett—from your own company—was caught drunk in formation yesterday and was thrown in the guardhouse. It so happens that Monett enlisted with Haichek, and they've been cronies ever since. I want you to get into the guardhouse and make friends with Monett."

Danny chewed at his lower lip and scowled. "Couldn't you get Monett

out of the guardhouse and let me make friends with him out here? I don't like that guardhouse stuff."

Shannon shook his head. "No, it's got to look good. Monett, having been arrested only yesterday, knows that you've been in dutch with your first sergeant ever since you came here. He won't suspect anything if you're jugged, and being the only other man in the guardhouse from Company G, you'll seem like a friend from home. You won't have to stay in more than two or three days, Danny."

Danny's eyes went past the lieutenant's. "Didn't you say yesterday that a noncom couldn't strike a private in ranks?"

"I did, but—what're you getting at, Danny?"

"I've got to get into the guardhouse, don't I? O. K., I may as well get some fun out of it, huh? See you later, lieutenant."

He started off, then remembered to salute. Shannon walked hurriedly back to the road. But on the other side, he stopped behind a tree and peered back at the parade ground.

Private Danny Higgins walked deliberately back to Sergeant Slattery and the other recruits.

"O. K., pal," he said flippantly. "Where were we?"

Slattery winked wickedly at Danny. "So he didn't take you along to the guardhouse? I thought after last night they'd be puttin' shacks on you by now. Well, well, so we're goin' to have the pleasure of your company a while longer. That's just fine. I need me a good dummy to show these other recruits. Private Higgins, 'ten-shun!"

Danny dropped his rifle to the ground. He picked it up lazily and shifted it from his right to his left hand.

Sergeant Slattery hopped in front of him. "You lunkhead, do you call that standin' at attention? Pull in your guts!"

"Go to hell, sarge!" said Danny.

Sergeant Slattery's eyes almost popped out of his head. "What was that, you blitherin'—"

Danny lifted one from his knees and hit the sergeant on the jaw. The big man reeled back, gasping. He recovered and lunged forward, but Danny shook a finger at him. "Sergeants dassent hit privates," he chided.

Sergeant Slattery's face turned green with suppressed rage. "You—" he said. "You're under arrest! You'll get ninety days in the clink for this."

"I can do with a good long rest," Danny sighed.

"You think you'll rest in the mill, do you?" Slattery said savagely. "You will like hell! Give me your side arms and off you go."

Danny Higgins had become familiar with the guardhouse the evening before. But he had not been in the back section. This was shut off from the guard's room by a door of strap steel.

Inside was a large cage, made of the same strap steel. Double-deck bunks lined the cage, and all around ran a narrow corridor, patrolled by a sentry armed with a club. The prisoners were supposed to remain inside

the steel cage, although before taps the door was not kept locked—the outer door and the sentry being sufficient protection.

Only two or three prisoners were in the steel cage when Danny was ushered in. These prisoners were "sick." That is, they had pleaded illness that morning and been given a C. C. pill. It would be a long time before they would be sick again.

It was almost eleven-thirty when the formalities were over and, in a few minutes, the prisoners began coming in by twos and threes. They already knew of Danny's offense and greeted him heartily.

At twelve o'clock the outer door of the cell room was thrown open and the prisoners poured out of the guardhouse to line up in a double rank. A dozen sentries surrounded them and they were marched to the prison mess hall several hundred feet from the guardhouse.

The food was better than that served in G Company. The presence of a few sentries did not seem to hurt the appetites of any of the prisoners. They made gaudy comments on the pork and beans and roared at their own wit. It was the first time Danny had eaten pie from a cup and with a spoon. They were a more jovial lot of soldiers than Danny had encountered so far. Even ten or twelve of them, who wore "shacks" about their ankles—prisoners already convicted of serious offenses and awaiting shipment to the military prison.

As they poured out of the mess hall to return to the guardhouse, a lean, dark-haired prisoner fell in beside Danny Higgins.

"I'm from G Company," he said. "You and me are the only representatives of that noble company. So you popped Slattery, huh?"

"Yesterday he bopped me," Danny replied.

Monett nodded. "I heard about it. He's been riding you pretty hard. I've only been in since yesterday, myself, but I learn quick. Stick with me and I'll show you the ropes."

"Yeah, but what's this about work? Suppose I don't feel like it?"

Monett frowned. "Hm-m-m, you feel like that? Better get over it. They can't *make* you do anything in the army, but they can sure as hell make you wish you had done it."

"If you ask me," said Danny darkly, "I'm just about ready to quit this army. I've got connections on the outside."

"What kind of connections?"

"People. The *right* people. Politicians."

Monett sniffed. "Then, what the hell are you doing in the army?"

Danny winked at Monett. "I used to be a bookie on the outside. The pari-mutuels cut into the racket, but I know a couple of other things—and army boys like to gamble."

"What're you talking about?" Monett asked sharply.

Danny stuck his hand into a pocket of his dungarees and pulled it out just far enough to reveal a thick stack of bills. "This! I won most of it from the top sergeant last night—that's why he started riding me this morning."

"But didn't they search you?" Monett exclaimed. "Prisoners aren't supposed to have money."

"Or tobacco," Danny said, "but I'll bet you've got some on you right now. I said I knew a couple of things. I'll show you sometime with a pack of cards. Or a pair of dice."

Monett's nostrils flared. "Stick around, buddy. Maybe we can get together—I figure on owning the guardhouse, myself, in a few days—"

That was the last chance Danny had to talk to Monett until fatigue call at one o'clock. He filed out of the guardhouse, then,

with the other prisoners. Monett caught his arm and jerked him into line directly beside him.

The gray-haired prison sergeant came along with his work sheet.

"Coal wagon, No. 1," he read off, "Baker, Zylinski and Haggerty. Coal wagon, No. 2, Swanson, Egbert and Jones. Garbage wagon, No. 1, Monett, Billings and you, new man—Higgins—"

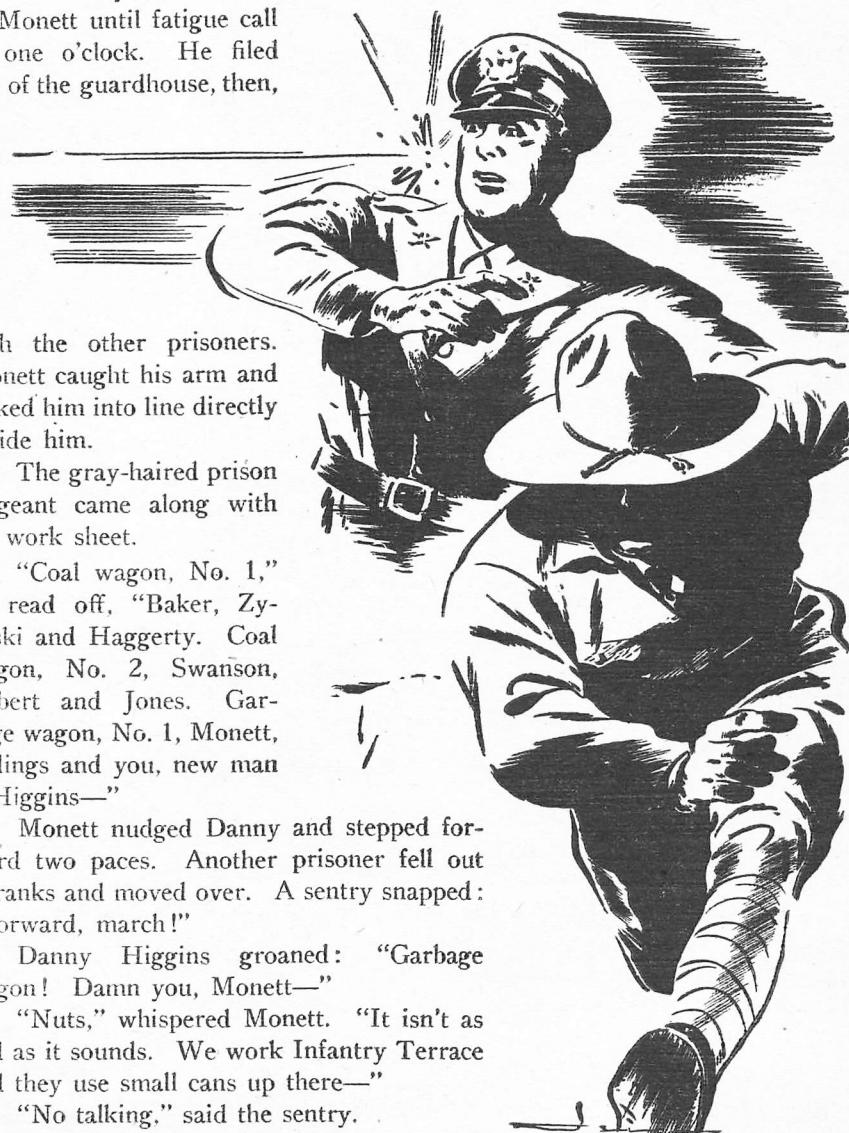
Monett nudged Danny and stepped forward two paces. Another prisoner fell out of ranks and moved over. A sentry snapped: "Forward, march!"

Danny Higgins groaned: "Garbage wagon! Damn you, Monett—"

"Nuts," whispered Monett. "It isn't as bad as it sounds. We work Infantry Terrace and they use small cans up there—"

"No talking," said the sentry.

Danny shot a quick glance over his



shoulder. The sentry was a dozen feet behind them, his rifle cradled in his left arm, right hand gripping the small of the stock, his finger convenient to the trigger.

He shuddered, then whispered out of the side of his mouth, "Is that guy's rifle really loaded?"

"Cripes, yes!" replied Monett. "A sentry has to serve a prisoner's time if the prisoner escapes—"

"And cut out the whispering," cried the sentry.

"A John!" Billings grunted.

VI.

AFTER seeing Danny Higgins placed under arrest by the first sergeant of Company G, Lieutenant Shannon returned to headquarters.

James Marsh, the inventor, was just going into the colonel's private office. "Oh," he said, "the detective lieutenant."

"Intelligence," Shannon corrected.

Marsh bared his teeth. "You might as well come in. This is about you— Colonel Jordan, I came here to make a complaint about this officer."

Colonel Jordan sent a look of concern at Lieutenant Shannon. "I don't understand, Mr. Marsh. I have a report of what happened last night, but I can't see where Lieutenant Shannon could have done anything to offend you."

"I told him I didn't want any sentries spying on me," Marsh snapped. "I worked all night getting things ready and all night these men were stamping around outside and spying on me. And this morning"—his face twisted angrily—"this morning one of them practically stuck me in the stomach with a bayonet."

Colonel Jordan blinked. "Why would he do that?"

"Because I wanted to look at some footprints or something that he seemed to be roosting over. The man was positively insulting. The best I could get out of him was that he was acting upon Lieutenant Shannon's orders."

"That's right," said Shannon. "I couldn't very well make a good cast with only a flashlight, so I had the men guard the footprints until this morning—"

"Bosh!" sneered Marsh. "There are five thousand soldiers in this camp. All wear the same kind of shoes. It's like telling one bean from a bushel of beans."

"Nevertheless," Shannon said, stiffly, "I can do it."

"Lieutenant Shannon had considerable police experience before he came into the army," Colonel Jordan explained.

"Then why doesn't he find out who killed that man last night?"

"I intend to find that out," Shannon said. "If you'll excuse me now—"

Seething, he saluted the colonel and left the office. In front of headquarters he paused a moment, then nodding, walked over to the Officers' Club. He found a major from the medical corps knocking billiard balls about.

"Good morning, Major Fox," he greeted him. "You're a married man, I believe."

"Why, yes," replied the medical corps officer.

"That's fine. I wonder if you'd do me a favor. Telephone your wife to loan me her perfume atomizer."

Major Fox's eyes goggled. "What the devil! Are you joking?"

"No, I'm serious. I need an atomizer and I don't know where else I could get one on the post. I haven't time to send out to the city for one."

The medical officer grinned. "Why don't you just pour the stuff on you?"

Shannon laughed. "I'm not going to use it to perfume myself. I thought you knew that I was in Intelligence. I need an atomizer for an experiment."

Major Fox became serious. "Oh, of course." He strode to a wall telephone and called the number of his residence. Before his wife replied, he covered the mouthpiece: "You'll send an orderly for it?"

Shannon nodded, then went to the door and called the orderly who was loafing outside. "Orderly, I have a couple of errands I want you to run. First of all, get me a pound of salt and then go to the Quartermaster Corps and get five pounds of plaster of Paris and a small quantity of shellac. Tell them it's for Lieutenant Shannon, by order of Colonel Jordan. When you get those items—they may have to send to a town drugstore for the plaster of Paris—go as quickly as you can to Major Fox's residence and bring the package Mrs. Fox gives you to the warehouse on Post #7. I'll be waiting there for you. Now, hurry!"

Shannon returned to the billiard room to thank the medical corps man, then hurried from the club and walked swiftly to the warehouse on Post #7.

The two sentries who were still on guard there, seemed relieved to see him. "We had a little trouble with this Marsh lad," one of them said. "He was going to sic his dog on us, until I told him I'd shoot the mutt if he did. Then he said he was going to snitch on us to the colonel. We didn't do anything but carry out your orders."

"I know Mr. Marsh is an inventor. Like most men of genius, he is somewhat irascible—and eccentric." Shannon concluded by clucking his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

Cautiously, he approached the window of the warehouse. The macadam of the alley reached to within three feet of the window and, of course, retained no footprints. But in the three-foot strip were several footprints. All but three were blurred, but the ones that interested Shannon were perfectly formed. The soil was a sandy clay and the prints were as fresh as when made—and traced with blood.

He got down on hands and knees and studied them. One of the prints was larger than the other two and had apparently been made by a different foot. Shannon wondered which belonged to Danny Higgins.

He was still down on his hands and knees when the orderly from the Officers' Club was challenged by the sentries. Shannon got up quickly and

took the parcels the man handed to him.

He sent off one of the sentries for a pan and some water. While the man was gone, he emptied the atomizer of its contents and filled it with the shellac.

Approaching the three footprints once more, he sprayed each in turn with the shellac. This, when hardened, which was almost immediately, formed a thin crust that did not affect the footprints in the least.

When the sentry returned with a pan of water, Shannon looked carefully at the prints, muttering to himself, "about three cups'll fill them." He then opened the sack containing the plaster of Paris and poured enough of it into the pan, so that the water was completely covered.

He stirred the mixture vigorously and concluded by thumping the spoon on the side of the pan, this to remove the last few bubbles of air from the creamy substance.

Satisfied with the mixture, Shannon poured it into the footprints, breaking the fall of the plaster of Paris with the spoon so that the contact of the prints was not broken by the impact.

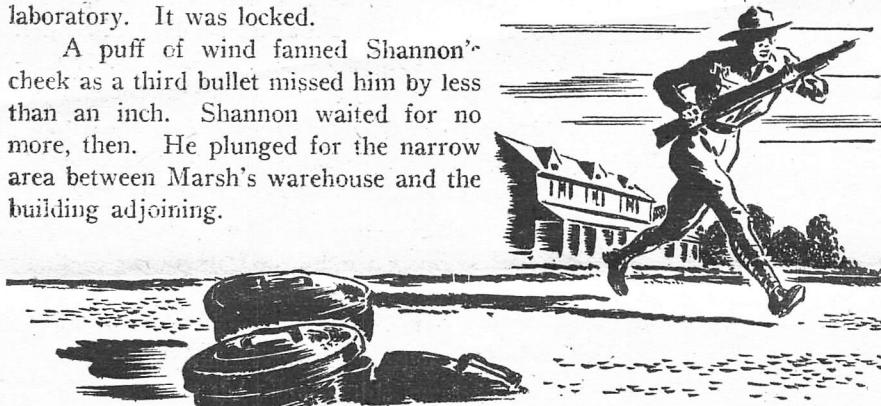
The entire operation took less than ten minutes. When the footprints were all filled, Shannon muttered to himself. "I never thought I'd have to use this stuff in the army."

He turned to the sentries. "All right, you can leave now—"

At that instant a bullet tore into the wall of the warehouse, missing Shannon's head by less than six inches. He threw himself flat upon the ground and another bullet zipped over his head and smacked into the wall.

He jerked around, came up to his knees and lunged for the door of Marsh's laboratory. It was locked.

A puff of wind fanned Shannon's cheek as a third bullet missed him by less than an inch. Shannon waited for no more, then. He plunged for the narrow area between Marsh's warehouse and the building adjoining.



From that vantage point he called to the sentries. "Where's the shooting from?"

"Damned if I know," one of the men called. "I'm lookin' to get a shot at him, but I can't see him."

"Then get out of sight. He seems to have been aiming at me, but he may start on you fellows in a minute."

PRISONERS Monett, Billings and Higgins rode up the steep hill to Infantry Terrace, on the back end of the garbage cart, drawn by a patient mule. They were really hitching on to the cart. They were supposed to walk behind it, but since the hill was steep and the sun was hot, they grabbed the tailboard of the cart and swung their feet underneath and braced them on the axle.

Twenty feet behind them plodded the perspiring sentry, dressed in heavy O. D.'s and carrying his rifle.

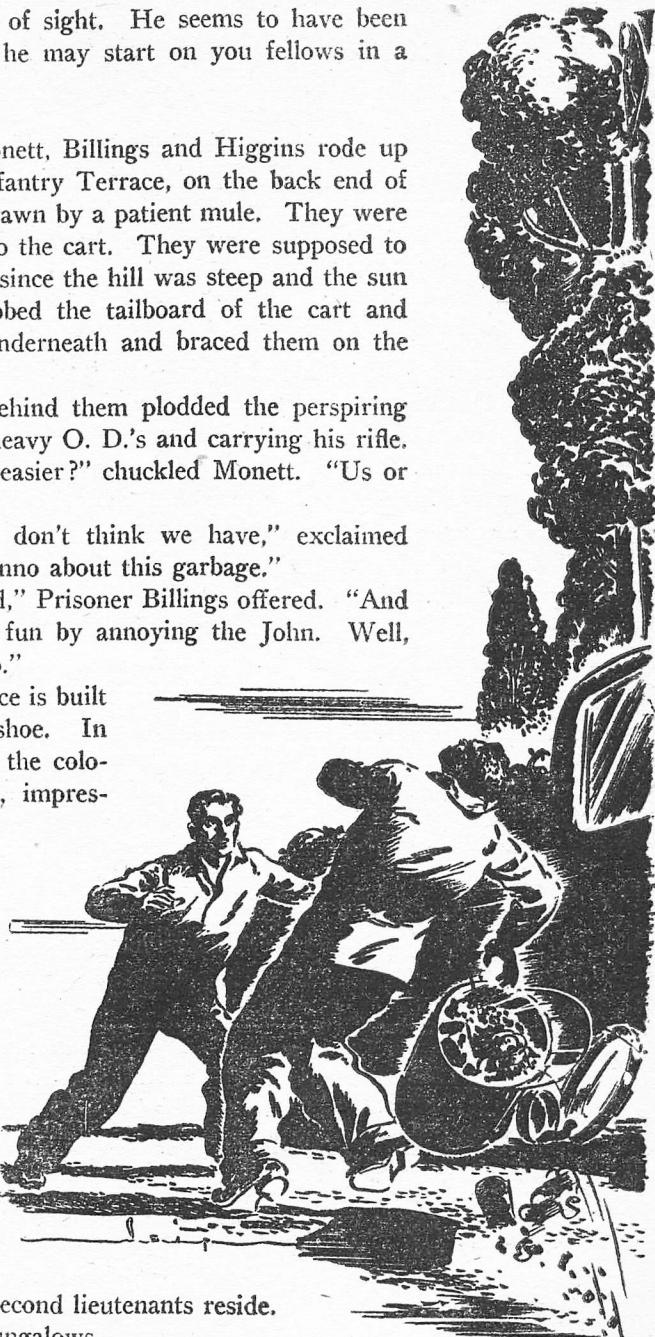
"Who's got it easier?" chuckled Monett. "Us or the sentry?"

"Damned if I don't think we have," exclaimed Danny. "But I dunno about this garbage."

"It's not so bad," Prisoner Billings offered. "And we can have some fun by annoying the John. Well, here's our first stop."

Infantry Terrace is built like a huge horseshoe. In the exact center is the colonel's house—a big, impressive brick building. On each side of it, falling away down the terrace are other officers' houses. They become smaller the farther away you get from the colonel's house in the center, until you get down near the ends, where the married second lieutenants reside. These houses are bungalows.

So it was at the lieutenants' houses the garbage detail began its work. Straight down from this side were the infantry barracks, a row of massive buildings, each housing two full companies of infantry.



From the first lieutenant's house to the nearest infantry barracks, that occupied by the Headquarters Company and the band, was about a half mile. It was another half mile or better, to Colonel Jordan's residence in the center of the horseshoe, up on the terrace.

The prisoners stopped the cart behind the first house and the sentry halted about twenty feet away. Billings then climbed up on the cart itself and Prisoners Higgins and Monett went to the back of the house for the cans.

Instantly, the sentry became nervous. "Hey, wait a minute!" he cried. "I can't watch all of you at once."

Monett and Higgins stopped. "You want us all three to go in for one little can?" Monett asked.

"Yes," he snapped. "We'll all go in—and out!"

Billings climbed down from the cart and joined the others. The three of them marched to the back door of the second lieutenant's house. Monett knocked on the door. A harassed-looking young woman opened it.

"We've come for the garbage, ma'am," Billings said courteously. "Our sentry won't let us come in for it, so you'll have to hand it out."

"What is this, something new?" exclaimed the lieutenant's wife. "I'm busy with the baby. If you can't come in and get it, perhaps my husband, Lieut. . . ."

As if by a command, the three prisoners turned and smiled at the sentry. The latter, red-faced, snapped: "Go in and get it!"

Higgins went into the kitchen and picked up a small container. He came out with it and Billings, chuckling, caught hold of the handle, along with Higgins. Monett immediately fell into the spirit of the thing.

The sentry followed them to the cart, coming closer than he ever had before. "Lay off, fellows. Gimme a break. I don't *like* doing this."

"Give up, John?" Monett asked.

The sentry bobbed his head up and down.

"All right," Billings said, then. "None of us is going to make a break. For all you know, *you* might be doing this tomorrow. You never can tell in the army."

They proceeded to the second house, where one man went in for the garbage and the others waited. At the next, it was Monett's turn to go in.

He brought out the container, approached the cart and raised it over his head to dump the stuff. Higgins, only two feet away, heard the bullet smack into Monett and caught his fellow prisoner as he was whirled around.

The garbage can clattered to the alley, punctuating the crack of the rifle which came to their ears.

Higgins lowered Monett to the ground. Blood was gushing from a hole in the man's chest. A trickle of it started at his mouth, became a bubble and burst. Monett went limp.

"Where'd that come from?" wailed the sentry.

"Gawd!" said Billings, "he's been killed!"

DIRT IN MY FACE

by BENTON BRADEN

Author of

*Detour to Death, Corpse Wanted,
Invitation to Murder, etc., etc.*

● Binnie has a big idea and it puts
her boss behind the eight ball as usual.

“LISTEN, Joe. I got a big idea.”

I raised my eyes suspiciously—and a bit apprehensively. When my youthful assistant, Binnie Hart, gets one of her big ideas it generally means trouble for me.

“It’s that Judge Strapp disappearance, Joe,” she said quickly. “You remember—it was almost three years ago? He faded just as a grand jury was about to clamp down on him.”

“I remember, Binnie,” I nodded. “It was those big politicos, Big Ed Wilkins, George Hardrul and Henry Tupplin, that slipped him a lot of dough and got him to lam. I wonder what happened to that old coot.”

"I did think he was dead, Joe," Binnie said meekly. "But I've sort of changed my mind. His body was never found. Nothing was ever heard of him. So I've finally come to the conclusion that he must be alive."

"And you've got a big idea," I scoffed.

"It's really a very simple idea, Joe," she argued earnestly. "I've got a man that can imitate the judge's writing to a T. Now, suppose we write a letter to Big Ed Wilkins—and make it look like it came from Judge Strapp."

"You think a smart guy like Big Ed would fall for a gag like that?"

"He wouldn't if he knows where Judge Strapp is—if he has already heard from the judge. But suppose he hasn't? Suppose—"

That started a hot argument. But Binnie hadn't exaggerated when she told me that she had done some work on the case. She's got it all figured out. She's even got Big Ed Wilkins' office wired so we can sit in an office above and take down everything that is said.

"We can't lose on it, can we, Joe?" she winds up, after she has got me out of breath. "All we've got to do is mail the letter and see what happens. If Big Ed just tears it up and throws it in the wastebasket, we'll know the idea is no good. What could be simpler?"

I had to admit that it did look simple enough. Only, I ought to have known that anything that Binnie Hart promotes, is going to get complicated—dangerously complicated—in the end.

BUT, on the first results, I had to give Binnie a pat on the back. That letter was dynamite when Big Ed Wilkins opened it. Binnie and I were spotted in the vacant office above. Ed used the phone right away.

"Hardru?" we heard him gasp. "Get over to my office right away. . . . Yeah, it's plenty important. . . . I got a letter from a friend who's been gone a long time. Get it? . . . Don't waste a minute. We've got to move!"

He hung up and a few seconds later we heard him speak almost the same words to Henry Tupplin, the third of the grafting trio. Then we got a mild surprise. Big Ed made another phone call to a guy he called Ludlow. I could guess that one. Arthur Ludlow was a politico, too. But a small potato. No one suspected that he was in on the Judge Strapp manipulations.

Those three grafters didn't waste a minute in answering Big Ed's call. Ludlow was the last to come in—eighteen minutes later.

"You—you've really heard from Strapp, Ed?" Ludlow gasped as he came in.

"I have," Big Ed said in his heavy voice. "Look at the writing. I'd know Strapp's peculiar handwriting anywhere. And it's no particular surprise to me to get the letter. I knew he'd get in touch with us again before the three years are up."

"Why three years?" That was Henry Tupplin's voice.

"Because of the statute of limitations!" Big Ed snapped. "No charges have ever been filed against us, so, at the end of three years, we'll be in the

clear and the law can't touch us. Judge Strapp knows that well enough. So he's going to make us cough up more dough before it's too late. He's putting the bee on us for another sixty grand."

"Sixty grand!" Hardru said in his whining voice. "When he left he said he wouldn't ever ask for another cent more than the eighty grand we forked over then."

"Well, he changed his mind," Big Ed snapped. "He's probably a little smarter than he was then—and harder. He knows he's got us in the corner. If he gave himself up and told what he knows—it would be a flock of indictments against each of us. So we have our choice. We can pay off or go to jail."

There was a long silence and then Ludlow spoke: "You'll notice Strapp says in the letter that this man, his friend and emissary, will have positive proof with him that he comes from Strapp. He'll have another letter—and a piece of convincing evidence."

"You were on the cops once, Ludlow," Tupplin put in. "You can look this man over and satisfy yourself that he's on the up and up."

"That's it," Big Ed agreed. "We'll get the dough ready—that's fifteen grand apiece—but we'll leave it to you to pay off when you're satisfied that everything is right. Now, this guy, who is representing Judge Strapp, will register in at the Hotel Cardham this afternoon. You're to go to his room at three o'clock this afternoon and make the contact. We'll all have our dough ready for you at noon. It's up to you from then on out. You make this guy give you all the proof you want."

"All right," Ludlow agreed. "I won't turn loose of the money until I see a lot more than handwriting. There are several crooks in town who could imitate Strapp's writing to the point where they could fool an expert."

You guessed it. I, according to the plan that Binnie Hart has carefully mapped out, am to be the friend and emissary of Judge Strapp who is to register at the Hotel Cardham and produce the proof that will satisfy the contact man for the four grafters.

At three o'clock, I was in Room 567 at the Cardham. Binnie was planted in Room 569, with things fixed so she can hear every word that is said, and even see a little bit through an enlarged crack in a connecting door.

This Arthur Ludlow was prompt. At a minute after three, he was tapping on the door. I called out for him to come in. The door opened and he stepped inside.

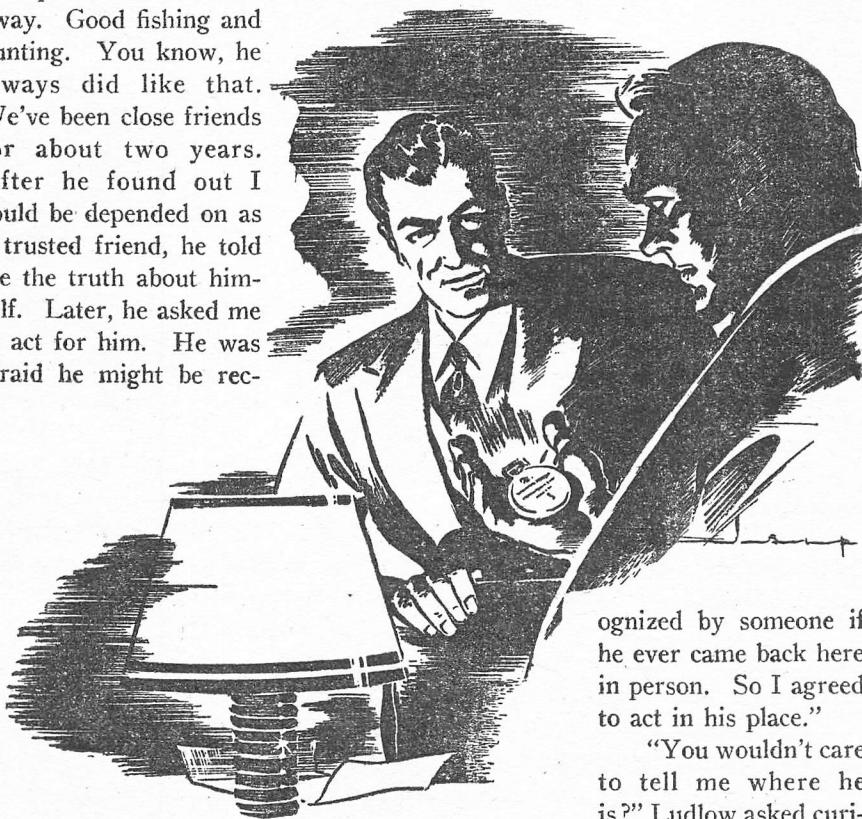
"It's all right, mister," I assured him, "if you have a message for me from a Mr. Ed. Wilkins."

"I have," he said easily. I waved my hand at the chair I had spotted so that Binnie could see it through the crack, and he sat down. I pulled an envelope from my pocket and handed it to him. He took it, opened it, and read the writing on the inclosed sheet of paper. It was a brief note, signed by

Judge Strapp, introducing me as Homer Pettigrew and assuring the reader that I had full power to act for Judge Strapp in any capacity, particularly to receive sums of money due the judge.

"It seems to be—regular," he admitted slowly. He held out his hand and I took it. "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Pettigrew. I have no doubt that everything is—all right. May I ask how our friend is?"

"He's fine," I said airily. "In the best of health. He's got a very nice little place—for his hide-away. Good fishing and hunting. You know, he always did like that. We've been close friends for about two years. After he found out I could be depended on as a trusted friend, he told me the truth about himself. Later, he asked me to act for him. He was afraid he might be rec-



ognized by someone if he ever came back here in person. So I agreed to act in his place."

"You wouldn't care to tell me where he is?" Ludlow asked curiously.

"The judge thought it would be better not to tell," I said soberly. "If one of you knew, you'd tell the others. And Hardru talks a lot when he gets tight, doesn't he? He might blab it out sometime. And then, where would you all be—if it got to that reform bunch that was trying to send you all up?"

"I guess that's right," Ludlow nodded. "It'll be better for all concerned if the judge stays completely under cover." He frowned a little. "In the letter that Wilkins received—Strapp said something about additional proof."

"That's right. I've got it right here," I told him as I put my hand in my coat pocket. I brought out a gold watch. Binnie had given me that watch and assured me that it was an exact duplicate of the one Judge Strapp had

carried when he was last seen. On the back of it was engraved, "With the Compliments of The Bar." A clique of lawyers whom Strapp had favored in receivership suits had presented him with the watch.

Ludlow took the watch in his hand, turned it over, stared at the engraved inscription on the back.

"Recognize that watch?" I asked him. "If you don't, the others will."

"I recognize it," he said, and his voice was a little hoarse. "It's the watch some lawyers gave Strapp two or three years before he faded. I remember it. Remember the inscription well."

"Strapp was sure you would," I said with some relief. "He's always carried it. When I left him four days ago he handed it to me, and said that it ought to convince you that I was acting for him."

Ludlow snapped his jaws together as he looked up. "It convinces me," he said. "Absolutely. I'm sure the others will be convinced when I show the watch to them. They'll all remember it. I think, Mr. Pettigrew, that we can finish this business in a matter of a couple of hours. You'll be here in the hotel the rest of the afternoon?"

"I'll be here," I promised him.

He shook hands again with me and left the room. I waited a few seconds, then went and opened the connecting door to 569. Binnie was gone. That was according to plan. Binnie was to beat Ludlow down to the street, get to her coupé, and tail him when he left. We wanted to know beforehand where this money was to be assembled, if we could.

That was the first point where our plans missed fire. Binnie was to call me back at the first opportunity. I didn't think much about it as I sat there in 567 for the first hour. Then I began to worry a little. It looked to me like Binnie would have had a chance to get to a phone during that time. But not a peep out of her. Still, I had something like another hour's leeway, because Ludlow had said it would take a couple of hours to get the dough ready and call me to come and get it.

It wasn't quite two hours when the phone jingled. I grabbed the receiver and answered. It wasn't Binnie. It was Arthur Ludlow.

"Everything is ready, Mr. Pettigrew," he said tersely. "Get your car, or a taxi, and come to my house at once. It's 5327 Langwell Street. It will take you about twenty minutes to get here, I think. Then we can finish in short order. You'd better write the address down."

I did that, then told him I'd get a taxi and come right out. I waited as long as I dared, hoping that Binnie would call. But she didn't. I couldn't stall any longer, so I went down and got a taxi.

It didn't make any difference, anyway, I thought, as I rode out to Ludlow's house. This was going to be short and sweet. As soon as he handed that money over to me, I would pinch him and drag him down to headquarters. We'd have Wilkins, Hardru and Tupplin brought in, too. When we confronted them with the dough, Binnie's transcription of the conversations, and our joint statements of what had occurred, one of them would be sure to

crack and agree to tell the whole story in return for a shortened sentence.

It was getting dark now, but I could see that Ludlow had a nice, comfortable two-story house, with enough ground around it to have room for a few shrubs and a driveway. There was a short walk that led up to the stoop.

The door opened as I reached the stoop and Ludlow met me there. "Come right on in," he invited. "I've got the money and I'm ready to turn it over to you. The others agreed with me that your showing was satisfactory. They all recognized Strapp's watch and that was the cincher."

He rubbed his hands together briskly as he led me into a room at the right. It was a well-furnished study, with a safe standing in one corner. But Ludlow didn't open the safe. Instead, he reached behind the far side of it and lifted up a black suitcase. He opened it. I blinked a little as I saw the currency that was stacked in that suitcase. There was nothing phony about this. He held out the opened suitcase to me and I took it in my arms. I was holding sixty grand in cash and there's enough Scotch in me to make me enjoy holding it, even if it was only going to be for a short time.

I saw it coming! I caught his first movement as his hand went behind him. I knew he was getting set to go for me! That he was going to come up with something in that hand and try to slap me down.

I wasn't worried a lot about it. I'm about as tough in a rough-and-tumble scrap as they come. I figure I can duck that gun and smack him good before he can get it up again and plug me with it. I can't quite figure out yet whether I was a little bit slow or this Ludlow was as fast as greased lightning.

No glancing blow like that was going to put me down. And I'd been in too many of these mix-ups to lose my head and not know what to do. I didn't make the mistake of reaching for my own gat and giving him time to get set for another crack at me.

That gun hadn't any more than glanced off my bean until I was after him. I was in there fast, punching with both hands, swinging rights and lefts. I figured I'd smother him or get in a knockout punch before he could make up his mind what his next move was going to be.

I charged right into him as I swung. All I could see was a blur, because that crack on the head seemed to have done something to my eyes. Somehow, I couldn't get my eyes to focus properly on my target. But I knew I was driving him back, and I figured I'd fix him quick when I got him back against the wall. I swung a right that had a tag on it that would cool him for keeps.

That right connected—but I guess it didn't connect with his jaw. I found afterward, that it was a white lamp shade that I K. O.'d. I was all tangled up for a fraction of a second. This Ludlow must have got in behind me, some way. Something bounced off the back of my head, and it wasn't any glancing blow.

I tried to get up. My head bumped against something hard—steel. When I tried to move my hands, I got a surprise. My hands were tied. So were my feet. I tried to let out a yell—and found out there was a gag in my mouth.

My brain began to get things straightened out. I had been out for more than a second or two. I had been out long enough for this heel, Ludlow, to tie me up and stow me in the luggage compartment of a car. Now we were taking a ride. I was twisted and cramped and I ached all over.

It must have been twenty or thirty minutes before I heard a key turning in the lock. The lid of the compartment went up. There was just enough light outside for me to make out Ludlow's figure as he looked down at me. He fumbled around and made sure that I hadn't wiggled out of the ropes he had bound me with. When he was satisfied, he got me by the shoulders and dragged me out to the ground. He pulled me along the ground for about thirty feet. I could see a little better now—and I didn't like what I saw.

"You see, Slippy!" Ludlow hissed at me. "You see what happens to smart chiselers like you? You're going to get what's coming to you. You're going to R. I. P."

I could see all right. See the hole that he had been digging. It was just about two feet from my right arm. Ludlow jumped down in the hole. He grabbed a shovel.

"It's not quite deep enough," he decided. "Another foot more will be just right."

He started throwing dirt. I forgot all about my aches and pains and started working on the ropes that held me. I didn't know whether I had a chance to work loose or not, but it was a cinch I had nothing to lose by trying—and I wasn't going to have any time to waste. Ludlow was throwing dirt mighty fast. I could guess that the hole was about four feet deep already.

I was still working desperately on the ropes when he climbed out and dropped the shovel. "Now, see what all your smartness is going to get you, Slippy!" he gloated. "Y' thought you were all set to take me for that dough."

All I could do was lie there and take it. I couldn't even make a smart comeback because I was gagged. The best I could do was gurgle a little.

"Now you'll have a little time to consider your errors," he said in a hoarse chuckle. "Just a little time. While you're being buried alive."

And the rat came around to my side of the hole and rolled me over twice. I slipped off the edge of the hole and went down *kerplunk!* I was on my back, looking up at the stars, when I got oriented again. And Ludlow is using that shovel. The first shovelful landed on my legs. The next one hit me in the stomach. He raised the third shovelful, peered down at me, and dumped it squarely in my face. Dirt in my face!

I mustered all the strength I had in a wild effort to get my hands free from the rope. It was the gag that loosened instead of the rope. I opened my mouth and let out a yell. I thought it would be a yell. But I was so weak that all that came out was a queer squawk. Ludlow stopped a minute and laughed.

"If that's the best you can do, you can yell your head off," he jeered. "Anyway, I'll fix that in a minute!" Up to that point he had been spreading

the dirt over the entire length of the hole. Now he started throwing it all in my face. I squirmed and twisted to get away from it.

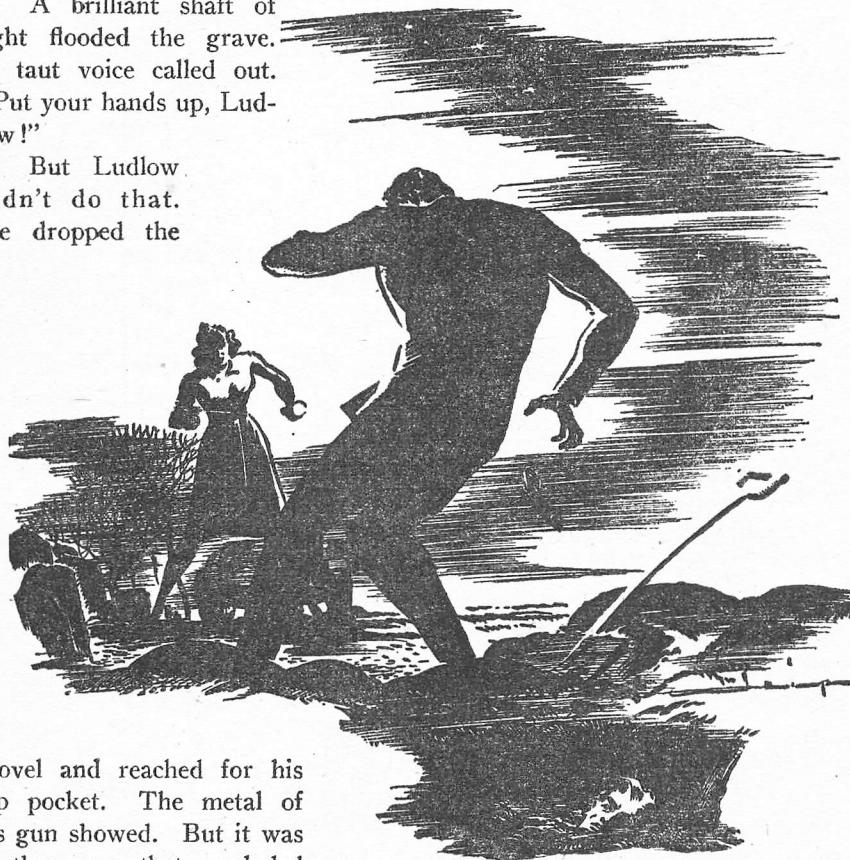
"How do you like it, Slippy!" he taunted me. "At that, you've got no complaint. What I should have done was take those ropes off you and made you dig your own grave."

"Yeah, you should have taken these ropes off!" I howled back at him. "You didn't dare take 'em off, you lousy punk! If I'd ever got these ropes off, I'd taken you apart! I'd have flattened you so quick that—"

That shovelful he tossed in caught me with my mouth wide open. I sputtered and choked and tried to get my head up. But the dirt was just about covering my face now. About all that was left out was my nose. I opened my nostrils and took one last deep lungful of air. I was going to hold it as long as—

A brilliant shaft of light flooded the grave.
A taut voice called out.
"Put your hands up, Ludlow!"

But Ludlow
didn't do that.
He dropped the



shovel and reached for his hip pocket. The metal of his gun showed. But it was another gun that exploded twice. Ludlow staggered, lost his footing and fell. He fell right into the grave on top of me. He hit me smack in the middle and the lights went out again.

I was lying on the ground when I came to. Binnie Hart was holding

my head. I gasped in relief when I found that my hands and feet were loose.

"Where's Ludlow?" I asked weakly.

Binnie covered the grave with her flashlight. She still had her gun in her right hand. "He's right there in the grave he dug for you," she told me. "He's not dead, so I'm keeping an eye on him. When you're feeling better, we'll take him in."

"How did you get out here?" I asked her.

"I followed Ludlow out here this afternoon when he left the hotel," she explained. "You see, Joe, I was convinced that Judge Strapp was dead. You weren't. I was afraid that you wouldn't listen to me if I started on that theory, so I told you I had changed my mind. But I hadn't. I was sure that Judge Strapp had been murdered. But, we found out at the time of his disappearance that Wilkins, Hardru and Tupplin had each checked out twenty thousand dollars and it seemed plain that they had given him the money and helped him to escape. It didn't seem reasonable that any of them would have murdered him. But when Ludlow showed up at Big Ed Wilkins' office this morning, I began to see daylight. Right away I checked. I could find no record of Ludlow having raised any money at that time. Yet, he was supposed to have kicked in twenty thousand, too. I had a hunch that Ludlow had taken sixty thousand dollars from the others to give to Judge Strapp. But, instead of giving it to the judge, he had appropriated the money for himself and killed the judge—hidden his body."

"So, I reasoned that Ludlow would be puzzled when he saw that watch. He would know that the original watch was buried with the judge, because the judge carried it when he disappeared. My hunch was right. When Ludlow left the hotel, he made a beeline for this spot. His first idea was that someone had found the grave, had found the watch in the judge's clothes, and was trying a squeeze play. I tailed Ludlow in my car. When he turned up the side road that leads here, I had to drop far behind to avoid alarming him. When I drove on up the road later, I saw his parked car. I drove on down the road and parked my car in the trees and watched. A few minutes later I saw him leave the clump of trees on the top of this hill and go back to his car. He drove back to the city. I turned around and came back, too. But I had a flat tire and had to have it fixed at a filling station where there was no phone. I knew now, of course, that Judge Strapp was buried up on this hill-top among the trees."

"He didn't seem to tumble that I was a cop," I told Binnie. "He called me Slippy. He must have the idea that I was—"

"I can explain that," Binnie said with a wry smile. "I got that duplicate watch at Lorden's, who made the original. I had the manager at Lorden's planted with two different stories. If Ludlow came there right after he left the hotel, they were to tell him that was the original watch. If he came after four o'clock, they were to tell him that it was a phony, that it had been made for a man that the store detective had recognized as a crook, a forger and con man named Slippy Hicks."

"I get it, Binnie. When Ludlow came out here and found that the grave hadn't been disturbed, he decided to check on the watch. That was about five o'clock. So they gave him the Slippy Hicks story at Lorden's. So Ludlow figured I was just a cheap little crook, working the dodge alone."

"I got scared when I got back to the city and couldn't find a trace of you," Binnie said. "I went to Ludlow's house. Just as I got there, I saw a car shoot out of the driveway. Ludlow was in the seat alone. I reasoned that he would have called you by that time. I thought maybe he had knocked you out and left you in his house, so I forced my way in after thinking it over for a little while. I got in that study, saw the smashed lampshade and that there had been a fight there. There was a packet of ten-dollar bills under the table that Ludlow had overlooked in his haste to get you out of there. I could guess what had happened, guess that Ludlow had you in his car and was bringing you out here to bury you in the same spot where he had buried Judge Strapp. So I started right out here. I turned off my lights when I came up the side road. After I parked, it took me some time to find my way up here in the dark. I didn't know where I was until I heard Ludlow's voice when he spoke to you at the last. Then I stepped in."

Binnie, and I didn't waste any more time after that. We found Judge Strapp's bare grave with the flashlight, then loaded Ludlow, and drove back to town. Hardru broke down and spilled the whole story, as soon as he was convinced that Judge Strapp was dead and that Ludlow had crossed him and the others.

Then we went up to Binnie's apartment and she did some first-aid work on my head. She also went back and mixed a couple of highballs, a moderate one for herself and a big one for me. She brought them into the living room and handed me the big one. She lifted her glass.

"Here's mud in your—" she began.

"Don't say it!" I yelled. "That's a hell of a way to toast a man that's just had dirt shoveled in his face!"

THE END.



THE SILVER SKULL

by K. WEBSTER

Author of
The Vest of Diamonds
and other stories.

● A silver plate stood between Paul Holt and death,
between him and the only job he'd ever wanted.

THE tubby man behind the oak desk beamed at Paul Holt and waved his cigar expansively. "Forget it, my boy," he said. "Forget it. You risked your life—almost lost it—to save the bank's property. What I did, any man in my shoes would have done."

"Just the same, I appreciate it—about the hospital," Paul Holt said. "But I'm even more grateful to Miss Channel for the blood transfusion that pulled me through. I wouldn't be able to pay her back if I lived a thousand years."

"My daughter was glad to do it," said Jess Channel, the tubby man. "She just happened to have the right kind of blood and that was all there was to it."

"You and your daughter are swell people."

Jess Channel, who was president of the First State Bank, slid out of his swivel chair and stood teetering with his right hand outstretched—a rather grotesque small-scale fat man. "I presume you'll be taking over your beat again, Holt. I'll feel better with you back on the job."

Holt's voice was tired, somewhat bitter. "I'm on pension, at twenty-eight! They say I'm incapacitated. Hell, I could walk a beat twenty years and never get slugged again; those things are rare. But the chief thinks I couldn't even handle a drunk without going unconscious."

"It's a dirty shame!" said Jess Channel. "The city ought to treat its policemen better than that—maybe by finding some inside job for them after they're injured in line of duty."

Holt grinned half-heartedly at the pompous little bank president. He liked Channel. "Well, in a way, I'm lucky," he said. "They offered me a job as elevator operator down at headquarters. Elevator operator! Why, I'd rot on a job like that. Anyway, I turned it down and they put me on pension. Maybe"—he shrugged his heavy shoulders—"maybe I'll be able to prove, some day, that I ought to have a chance at laboratory or nonviolent field work."

Channel had sat down again and was staring at a bathing-girl blotter on his desk. "I don't know, Holt, but what I couldn't put you on down here—as a bank guard, say. What do you say?"

"That's a far cry from police work," Holt said, "but it might be fine for a—well, a misfit like me. Still, I can't expect you—"

"Nonsense! The job's yours. Report tomorrow morning and we'll get you a uniform."

Holt turned to go, but Channel stopped him with a gesture. "Mind telling me just what happened the night they broke in here? I only know what my daughter told me and what I saw in the newspapers and the few things the detectives said in my presence."

Holt nodded and sat down. "Not much to tell, really. I was walking my beat, around midnight, when I saw light from the alley door. I went back there, saw a couple of yeggs working on the vault with an oxygen torch. I should have called my precinct station for help, but"—he laughed mirthlessly—"I was going to be a hero. I pushed open the jimmied door and walked in. Something smashed me on the head, from behind, and I fell to my knees. A guy stepped over me and I could feel his knee against my head. He set himself and let me have the blackjack again. That second wallop put me out for an hour."

Channel puffed at his cigar. "You didn't see this man, did you?"

"Wish I had. All I know is that I got a funny kind of odor, like wet leather—it had been raining that night—and then I passed out. Anyway, when I came around again, my captain was right there, ready to raise hell with me for not calling in. Only thing that took steam out of the bawling out was the alarm I set off. But you know all that."

"It's a little hazy now. It happened so long ago."

"Falling forward, I must have touched off the alarm system. An accident, but Captain McCoy couldn't know that. The cops came and killed both safe men in a gun fight. But they never did get a line on the lookout, the guy who slugged me and sneaked away with the money while his buddies were getting killed. How much was the haul, anyway?"

"More than ten thousand," Channel told him.

"I'd like to get a line on that bird," Holt said wistfully.

Channel was silent for a moment; he kept looking at the ceiling. Finally he said: "You walked your beat earlier that same night. Tell me, didn't you see lights then?"

Holt's steady gray eyes narrowed on Channel. "What makes you think I wouldn't have investigated?"

"Nothing. Point is, you might have seen lights in another part of the building then, decided everything was all right."

"I don't get it," Holt said bluntly. "Are you trying to say the heist men might have prowled the whole joint before taking the safe?"

Channel was biting his cigar and looking down at the bathing-girl blotter, refusing to meet Holt's gaze. "Just a wild theory I had. Forget it. Report in the morning, will you?"

Holt walked out, frowning. It had been a peculiar interview, no matter how he looked at it. Channel, for some reason, wanted off-the-record information about what had happened at the bank the night Holt was slugged. But reviewing the robbery didn't make much sense; Channel knew as much about it as anyone.

There was more to the case—a hell of a lot more. After identifying the two bank robbers at the morgue, Holt had felt a sharp twinge of pain in his head. Abruptly he'd passed out again. Waking up, he found himself in a narrow white hospital room, heard a nurse explain that his present trouble was a blood clot—result of the slugging. He didn't respond to treatment. Eventually a transfusion became necessary. Nora Channel, who'd called on him with her father, generously responded to the plea for blood.

Eventually the blood clot developed into a brain tumor. Nobody bothered to tell him that there'd been seventy brain-tumor operations before his last year; that all seventy patients had become corpses. He was the seventy-first case, and expected to be the seventy-first corpse. But he fooled the surgeons by pulling through.

He smiled wryly at that. His operation had been a success, but all his life he'd have to rely on a silver plate set into his skull. In time, the doctors had said, he'd be entirely normal again; for a few years he'd have to expect almost intolerable headaches and sharp thermal-change pains. And he had to prevent skull shock; his head was still so sensitive that a light blow might knock him out, even kill him.

A silver plate stood between him and death, between him and the only sort of job he'd ever wanted. Funny, huh?

PAUL HOLT felt a bit silly, that first morning, walking back and forth in a dark-blue uniform with shiny brass buttons—silly because this new job seemed, somehow, a travesty on the old. There really wasn't much to do; he and the other guard, a dour old man named Allen Moody, were supposed to steer people to the proper cages, give them information about banking hours, take care of their children if necessary, keep loiterers out of the marble-walled lobby. It was flunkey work, like running an elevator, but at least he didn't have to see his former partners and be reminded of what he'd lost.

When Nora Channel walked in to visit her father, Holt knew why he had accepted this job—if he hadn't known all along. She was a girl who put lilting melody into his heart, made him forget the ache in his head. She walked with grace, her head held high. Her eyes were the widest, softest Holt had ever seen. It was hard, really, to imagine two persons as completely different in appearance as Nora and her father.

"Dad told me about your new job," she said. There was something about her speech, too, that caught him by the throat—an intimate little note that he liked to imagine was reserved for him. "I'm glad you decided to try it."

Looking at her for a moment, he was tongue-tied, like a high-school sophomore. Then he blurted out: "It's good to be around when you walk in."

"Hey, Holt!" The call, pitched just above normal voice, came from the receiving teller's cage.

Nora, who had been about to say something, smiled and went on.

Holt swiveled and peered through the gilded bars set above the teller's red-walnut till. Sam Mitchell, one of the bank employees he'd met, was leaning slightly forward, his handsome face unsmiling.

"Get that binder from the securities cage," Mitchell told him, his voice on dead level.

Holt's lips tightened. He wanted to ask Mitchell why that unimportant job couldn't have waited until the conversation with Nora was over. But he controlled himself and followed the order.

Jerry Moody, son of the other bank guard, spoke to Holt from the securities window: "Don't mind that guy Mitchell. He's got a complex, or something. Everybody knows Nora ditched him."

Holt nodded to Jerry, a heavy-jawed young man who'd already acquired the sour expression of his father. Jerry looked sour now, as though suddenly sorry to have taken Holt's side. Holt picked up the binder.

Sam Mitchell was still leaning forward when Holt returned with the binder. His eyes, glinting angrily, crawled over Holt's massive shoulders, then lifted to the lined, serious face that was incongruously boyish.

"A tip for you, Holt. Lay off that girl."

"Why, you—"

But Mitchell had turned away and was walking to a table littered with coins and wrappers. He moved with an awkward, hitching gait, like a man with an old hip break.

Holt stood motionless, watching Mitchell's straight, wide shoulders, trying to fight down the cold rage in his throat. His head throbbed painfully, as it always did when he was stirred. That punk! Thought he still had a claim on Nora, did he?

All the rest of that day, and in the dull days that followed, Holt could feel the cold scrutiny of Mitchell's eyes. On the surface, Mitchell seemed friendly enough; he didn't repeat his warning, though Holt talked with Nora at every opportunity. Just by watching, Mitchell eventually became a nuisance, to be tolerated like the silver plate.

Jerry Moody kept to himself, evidently trying to live up to his name.

One morning, a Monday, Holt was totally unconscious of the bright glare of the bank lobby, now familiar; of Mitchell's covert glances; of Jerry Moody and all the rest. He knew that he'd found either the promise of a new life or reached a definite dead end.

It began last night—with the movie he couldn't remember now. Then the walk to Nora's home, and finally the tingling warmth of her body against his.

The hell of it was that he had nothing to offer her. He should have held himself in check, never treated her as anything but a casual friend. He couldn't marry her and expect her to live on a bank guard's salary; he was still as far as ever from getting the police job that might see them through, in a modest way. A little desperately, he considered chucking this job and going to another city. That, without Nora, would be hell.

He was still considering the problem when Jess Channel walked through the lobby. The small, clattering steps of the bank president didn't completely register on Holt's consciousness until Channel's office door closed. Then Holt realized that Channel hadn't clapped him on the back, as usual; hadn't said a word.

Maybe Channel knew about the clinch Holt and Nora had gone into last night. Maybe he realized it wasn't just a passing flirtation with his daughter. If so, he probably didn't like to think of Holt as a possible son-in-law. Well—

Nora came in then, halted abruptly in front of him. She refused to meet his eyes. In a voice so low and tense he could hardly understand the words, she said: "Forget everything that happened last night, Paul. Everything! Maybe that's expecting too much of a . . . a man like you." She stood gasping. "You . . . you blackmailer!"

"Wha-at!"

"You heard me," she said then, her lips twisting to hold back tears.

"For God's sake, Nora! What are you saying!"

"You understand what I'm saying."

She twisted away from him and half ran toward her father's office. Her dry sob drifted back to him.

He could feel his throat pinching shut, and there was heavy pain in his

head. He stood there motionless, his eyes bleak. He considered running after her, decided against it.

For fifteen or twenty minutes he did his work automatically; then, no longer busy, he leaned on a radiator and tried not to brood.

"Holt!"



The low call made him turn. Jerry Moody, at the securities window, was watching him with his sly eyes and gesturing for him to come over.

"Yes?" Holt said resentfully.

Jerry shifted his gaze. "Come over, Holt. I gotta talk to you." Holt went over.

"Remember, Holt," Jerry said uneasily, "I got nothing against you. This is just a case of following orders, see?"

"Yes, yes. Get on with it."

"Well, I was just in Mr. Channel's office and he says, 'You go out there and fire Holt. Tell him to get his pay right away. And tell him if he tries to see me, I'll call the police.' Understand, Holt, it isn't me that wants you out."

Holt didn't care about the job, exactly. But—what the hell was it all about! Quick rage surged, then went away. Jess Channel and Nora had both done more for him than anyone else. If they wanted it this way, he couldn't argue. He turned and started toward the

door.

"Wait!" Jerry said.

Holt turned back, somewhat reluctant at Jerry.

The securities man was obviously rattled now; he kept licking his lips and making aimless doodles with a pencil. "Look, Holt. I don't know if I ought to say anything. But you used to be a cop. And, maybe you'll know what to do."



ly, and stared

Holt was puzzled. What could Jerry be driving at now?

"It's like this, Holt." Jerry's voice quickened, as if he wanted to get everything off his chest in one burst of words. "There was an audit made here the day after the robbery, so maybe the heist was just a cover-up. Maybe, I say. Anyway, I walk into Channel's office just when he's talking to Nora, and I hear him say: 'Could Holt know I was at the bank that night? I can't imagine anyone else who'd be able to pull a thing like this on me.' Now, I'm not suggesting anything, but maybe he meant the night of the robbery."

Holt's mind was spinning. It wasn't easy, after everything Channel had done for him, to decide that Channel must have been mixed up in the robbery. But what Jerry Moody had said tied in with Channel's questions about any lights Holt might have seen on the night of the robbery.

"Yes," said Holt slowly, "he might have meant the night I was slugged, I'll decide what to do."

Should he confront Channel right now, ask him why he didn't tell the police he was at the bank just before Holt walked past on his first evening round of the beat? Or would it be better to get out of town and never face either

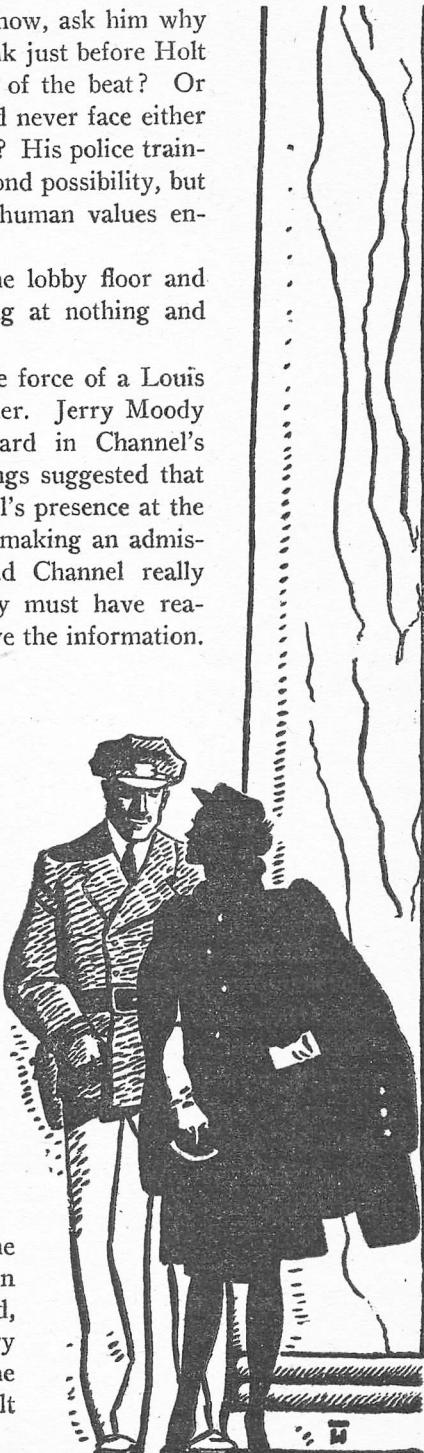
Channel or Nora again? His police training was against the second possibility, but this was a time when human values entered.

He had crossed the lobby floor and now stood near Mitchell's cage, staring at nothing and clenching his hands.

A new thought struck him with the force of a Louis hook. Nora had called him a blackmailer. Jerry Moody had mentioned a conversation overheard in Channel's office a few minutes ago. The two things suggested that the blackmail attempt hinged on Channel's presence at the bank at the wrong time and on his not making an admission to the police. And, if Nora and Channel really thought Holt was the blackmailer, they must have reasoned that no one else could possibly have the information.

Assuming, though, that Channel himself wasn't the lookout who had slugged Holt and escaped with ten grand, there could be another man with knowledge of Channel's secret activities—the real lookout, someone who knew Channel. That narrowed the field.

Having Holt fired, indicated that Channel wasn't going to make any hush payments; otherwise Channel would have done almost anything to keep the supposed blackmailer in good spirits. So the real blackmailer was probably faced with the problem of either carrying out his threat or no longer bothering Channel. The threat, no doubt, was that the police would find out about Channel's presence at the bank. And the blackmailer, intent on keeping himself in the background, might very well invent a likely story and figure on having it carried to the police by someone else—maybe by Holt himself. It seemed plausible.



HOLT's mouth tightened as he shot a look at the securities window, to find Jerry Moody studying him. Holt lowered his gaze and tried to find possible holes in his theory.

There was a swift, angry click of heels and Holt looked up in time to see Nora recrossing the lobby. Her head was high and her eyes refused to shift in his direction. He took a single step toward her, then stopped and shrugged helplessly. When the lobby door swung shut behind her, he felt what might have been a vacuum in the pit of his stomach.

Mitchell's voice interrupted Holt's black thoughts. "Come over here, Holt, and tell any customers to wait till I get back to my cage. My leg harness is chafing like hell and I've got to get to the washroom."

Holt nodded without looking up, not remembering he wasn't even an employee any more. He was still standing there when Mitchell came back. Then he straightened, snapped his fingers.

A speculative gleam came into his eyes. He got out a pencil and looked at it, frowning deeply. Then, catching Mitchell's puzzled glance, he said: "Let's have a scratch pad, Sam."

Mitchell shoved one toward him, jerking his shoulders in annoyance.

Holt shielded the pad with his left hand, then wrote in a heavy scrawl:

I know who's been trying to squeeze money out of you, and I'm going to nail the guy. This isn't a bluff. To prove it, I'll stick out my chin to the extent of saying he gets his pay from the First State.

Give me till tomorrow morning to go over my facts and build up a case that'll mean conviction. I've got a personal matter to settle with the guy, and I want to see him cooled off in a cell.

Holt tore off the top sheet, folded it carefully, pushed the scratch pad back to Mitchell. Then he got a used envelope out of a wastebasket and tucked its flap over the note. He signaled a uniformed bank messenger, said: "Give this to Mr. Channel, right away. He won't see me."

Holt went to the door and, without a backward glance, stepped out into a raw, blustery fall wind that whipped fine rain into his face. His head ached almost unbearably, partly from inner turmoil, partly from temperature change. At any rate, his mood matched the weather.

Rage grew in him as he walked—a cold rage that made his face grim. His heavy shoulders were bowed, as if under a tremendous weight; his eyes peered straight ahead, like those of a sleep walker. The chance he'd wanted was coming. And he couldn't miff it. Too much was at stake this time.

He walked for an hour, heedless of the driving rain, heedless of everything but the chance to square accounts.

THE rooming house where Paul Holt stayed in a two-room suite, modest enough for his small pension and low salary, was an ivy-covered brick building as old as the city. He opened the front door with his passkey, went down a first-floor hall to his rooms. Lips tight, he crossed the bedroom to his dresser and pulled out the top drawer. There lay his .38 service revolver, a Sam

Browne belt coiled around it. He lifted the gun, letting his fingers play along the breech plate. Then he twirled it expertly, and its solid, cool weight felt good in his hand.

Painstakingly he took it apart, tested the mechanism, oiled all points of friction and reassembled it. Then, satisfied with its positive action, he loaded it and carried it into his living room. He sat down in a badly frayed but comfortable easy-chair and stared moodily at the faded rug, thinking. If he hadn't figured completely wrong, he'd have use for the revolver within the next twenty-four hours.

He smoked cigarettes until he could feel rawness inside his mouth. There was hunger in his stomach now, but tenseness made it impossible for him to eat. He just sat there, watching smoke coil and hoping the next developments would prove him right. If they didn't—

The air in that unventilated room was foul with cigarette smoke, which made him drowsy. For a time, sheer will power kept his eyes open; after that he dozed fitfully. It was one o'clock in the afternoon when he jerked awake. The room showed about as much light as before, and he decided to sleep a little longer. Nothing would happen until evening; by that time he'd be wide awake, completely alert, ready for anything.

But he was still sleeping at seven o'clock, when the rear window of his bedroom, facing the backyard, was raised silently. The wind, having grown even stronger, slashed at the shade, but a gloved hand caught the shade and prevented it from rattling. A pair of broad shoulders almost blocked the narrow opening; elbows braced on the window sill, gave enough leverage to bring the man up into the room with little help from his legs—

Paul Holt's face twitched a little; he moved restlessly. He opened his eyes, conscious of fiery pain in his skull. It was thermal-change pain, he knew at once, and that meant a different temperature right in this room. But all the windows had been closed. A lower temperature—he could feel it on his wrists now—must mean an open window. He went suddenly cold, but not physically. His chance had come—and he had almost slept through it, right into death. In something like panic, he reached for his revolver.

He was groping for the reading-lamp cord when the intruder appeared in the doorway. There was murder in the man's eyes, murder in the short gas pipe in his right hand. Holt's body was turned so that the revolver didn't show, and the man advanced with a peculiar hitching motion.

"I was expecting you, Sam," Holt said, keeping his voice at conversational level only with effort.

"Then you know what to expect, don't you?" Sam Mitchell's voice was hurried. "You know—"

"That's enough!" rapped Holt. "By coming here and breaking in, you've built up a swell circumstantial case against yourself—a case that ties in with other factors. I've got you covered with the same gun I should have used on you at the bank a little more than a year ago."

"The hell with that!" Mitchell shouted—and leaped.

Holt's gun spewed smoke and rocketing sound. Mitchell stopped short, a ghastly grimace on his twisted face. His left hand climbed to a spurting bullet wound above the heart; his right went above his head with the gas pipe. He hurled the short length straight at Holt, at the same time coughing up blood and falling forward.

Holt threw his right hand across the left side of his face, the way a fighter blocks a right cross. Instantly it went numb under the impact of iron. The revolver clunked to the floor. Mitchell toppled across Holt's knees, rolled free. And his complete limpness showed he was dead.

Holt sat still, waiting for the pain in his head to subside. There was sudden clamor in the hall, a feminine voice yelling hysterically: "I've got to get through! Move aside! Paul . . . Paul—"

He roused himself, stood up. Slowly he weaved to the door, nursing his throbbing head and his injured arm, pulled it open.

The hall was choked with people attracted by gunfire. Struggling in the arms of a policeman, whom someone must have called, was Nora Channel. Her cheeks were flushed and her breasts were heaving. A helpless wail came from her when she found the policeman's grip too strong.

And then she saw Holt. Her face cleared. "Thank God!" she murmured with a sigh that was half a sob—and passed out in the cop's arms.



"I couldn't let her go in," the cop explained, almost apologetically. "After that shooting— Hey, how about that?"

"I shot a man who broke into my apartment," Holt explained. "His name was Sam Mitchell, and he worked at the First State."

"How come you know so much about him?"

But Holt was bending over Nora, oblivious to the cop and the others.

There was complete confusion for a time. Holt knew he was saying some pretty silly things to

Nora; he could hear shouts and a thousand questions fired at him by a couple of prowlp cops who'd responded to an alarm. Nora came out of her stupor about when Captain McCoy arrived with a contingent of policemen from Holt's old precinct station.

"All right, men," McCoy said. "Round up the people who haven't any business here and get 'em out in the street. Holt, I'll talk to you in your rooms."

Holt nodded and helped Nora to her feet. She said hurriedly: "I'm sorry we ever thought you were crooked, Paul. When dad showed me your note—that was less than an hour ago—I was sure everything would be all right. I came over here, heard the shot—"

"All right," Captain McCoy snapped. "Get in there." And then, to one of the cops: "You come in, too."

Sam Mitchell was lying at the foot of Holt's chair, one leg bent far back under him at what seemed an impossible angle. Nora gasped audibly, clutched Holt's arm. "Paul, you . . . you didn't!"

"Self-defense," he told her grimly. "Right here is the man who was trying to squeeze blackmail payments out of your dad. The man who slugged me when the robbery was pulled. The guy who put the heist men on the job to cover shortages in his own accounts, the way I figure it."

"What's all this?" Captain McCoy demanded.

The policeman who'd come in with Captain McCoy was making notes in a little book, and Holt knew his own remarks would be taken down verbatim.

"I've got a good case against Mitchell," Holt said. "It all added up when I found out Mitchell had an artificial leg. Look at that leg now, all doubled up. I had already narrowed the field of suspects to bank employees when he made a crack about a leg harness—something a man with two good legs wouldn't need."

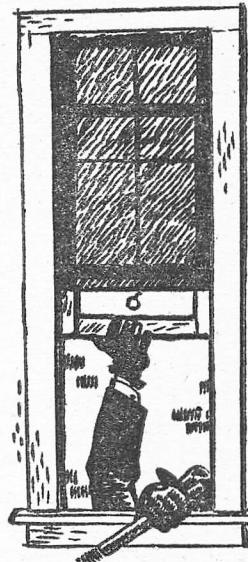
"You couldn't tell by watching him walk that he was one-legged?" McCoy put in bitingly.

"They make artificial legs right these days. Mitchell had a little hitch in his walk; that was from swinging his hip to bring the fake leg forward so he could put weight on it."

"That's right," Nora said. "And Sam had become expert at walking. Only two or three people at the bank knew he was crippled, and they weren't talking about it because he'd been using the leg so long."

"That ties in, too," Holt said.

"Stop talking in circles," Captain McCoy snapped. "I'm ready to be-



lieve this guy could fool people with his wooden leg, but how did the wooden leg prove he was the lookout that bopped you over the head and ran off with some dough?"

"The man who hit me," Holt said slowly, "came very close to hit me again. His knee brushed my head and I got a whiff of leather. It was a rainy night, and if Mitchell had been wearing his leg for a long time so the shellac was scuffed off, it would give off the smell of leather. You see, modern artificial legs are made of rawhide, tightly wound on a thin wooden shank."

Captain McCoy nodded. "Go on."

"Well, I made a big show of writing a secret note to Jess Channel—but I pushed down on the pencil so hard the impression went through to the second sheet of the scratch pad, the one that would be on top after I ripped off the original. I imagine Mitchell thought he was pretty clever when he read my message."

"Say," said McCoy, "you're still a copper, the way you do things. I wonder what the chief is going to say—Look, Holt, we're going to check every angle, and I hope you're right."

Holt's grin showed plenty of confidence. He put an arm around Nora's shoulder, whispered: "What was your dad doing at the bank that night?"

"He was repaying a personal loan," she whispered back, flushing.

"And how about Jerry Moody? Did he walk in on you this morning, just when you were talking about your dad's after-hours trip to the bank?"

Nora nodded.

"What's all the hush-hush about?" McCoy wanted to know. And then, evidently noting Nora's flush: "It's that way between you, huh?" He grinned for the first time. "We won't be going to the station for another five minutes yet, so we'll wait for you out in the hall."

Holt didn't mind when the door closed behind the cop and Captain McCoy. And Nora's face showed that she didn't mind, either.

THE END.

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THE DEAD TAKE NO BOWS

by RICHARD BURKE

Author of
The Quinny Hite stories.

● "Maybe the tabs won't eat this murder up," thought Quinny. "Looks like it happened thirty years ago and just now got uncovered."

I.

IN the Hotel du Nord's palmier days, Room 508 had been the parlor of a suite retained on a yearly basis by Désirée la Fond—née Dora Donkin—gay, winsome, and alluring. Now 508 was just a shabby room, unattached to any of the others, occupied on a weekly basis by a hard-working dancer who also sang—perhaps the other way around—named Joan Fairley. Joan, at the moment this narrative opens, was engaged in preparing breakfast with an electric stove and an assortment of dime-store utensils, kept when not in use in the bottom bureau drawer.

Joan's guest was lying on the bed, his hands stuffed into his pockets, his legs crossed, and a weather-beaten derby hat tilted over his eyes. He seemed thoroughly comfortable. Too much so, the girl decided, frowning.

"Listen, Quinny, I wish you'd either take off your shoes or put something under 'em when you camp on my bed," she complained, pushing hair out of her eyes with a slender forearm.

"Yeah? I take 'em off and somebody pops in," her guest returned tartly. "Then what? What're they going to think, seeing me on your bed with my shoes off?"

"You've got your hat on."

"Hats don't matter," he demurred.

"Anyway, we're getting married after breakfast."

"They wouldn't believe that. Lots of people get married after breakfast—hardly anybody before, as a matter of fact. And nobody would believe I was getting married, before or after breakfast, dinner, lunch, or supper. Not me, they wouldn't. Only way they'd ever believe I was married would be to show 'em the shotgun, or the empty bottles." He paused a moment, then went on: "What do you want to get married to me for, anyway? I'm not much help, you know."

Joan sighed. "You're no help at all, Quinny. But for some fool reason I love you. Besides, it will cut down on expenses when I don't have to pay your room rent as well as my own. Did you remember to get a wedding ring? They're customary, you know, and I'll be damned if I'll buy my own!"

Quinny fumbled in his vest pocket and brought out a wedding band. "Sure," he grunted. "Here it is—solid gold."

"Quinny! Where did you get a solid-gold wedding ring? Is it hot?"

"It ain't hot," denied Quinny, moving the ring about to observe the light on its surface. "I bought the damn thing."

"How much?" asked the practical and suspicious Joan.

"Now, listen, Jones"—he always called her that—"I don't want you to go bragging around how much dough I put into your wedding ring. It cost plenty."

"How much?" insisted the girl.

"A buck and a half," surrendered Quinny sullenly.

"Solid gold," commented Joan, and turned to her cookery.

"Well, what difference does it make?" grumbled her guest. "I know people that's been married for years on a dime-store ring."

"Doing all right, too." You forgot to put that in."

The man abandoned the argument, pulling his derby down a little farther over his eyes.

"Marrying you is all right," he said presently. "It's getting married at all that's out of my line. If I was working—"

"Yes, I know." Joan put some sliced bread on the table and plugged in the toaster. "You would be working if you hadn't got smart and pinched the district attorney's brother-in-law in a crap game."

"Well, how was I to know the D. A.'s brother-in-law went for dice games? I didn't even know he had a brother-in-law."

"Detectives are supposed to know things," replied Joan. "I didn't know the homicide squad had anything to do with crap games, anyway."

"They don't," Quinny said, coming to the table and taking over the toast making. "But there hadn't been a murder in three weeks that wasn't just routine stuff. So I go out with Jimmy Farmer and Doc Ames to collect dues from Lally's crap game. Lally was in arrears—you know, behind with the kick-in. The louse didn't come across, so we put on the pinch, nice and regular. And this guy Dunston has to be sitting in."

"Why didn't he tell you he was the D. A.'s brother-in-law?"

Quinny snorted derisively.

"He did. Everybody's got an uncle or something downtown when you make a pinch. If you listened to what guys tell you, you'd never make a pinch. So he rides along with the rest of the bums, and so I step on the commissioner's rug for a scalding and get set down—permanent. So far."

"They had a lot of nerve firing you for that," commented Joan, putting a plate of ham and eggs on the table and sitting down opposite Quinny. "What did the commissioner say?"

"Too much," replied Quinny, forking a generous share of the viands onto his plate. "A lot too much. He even got personal. Of course, he claims that grabbing off the brother-in-law had nothing to do with it. So he cans the best homicide detective New York ever had—for personal reasons."

Joan rescued a piece of toast which was beginning to smoke. "So now you're a private detective."

"Too damned private, so far," grumbled Quinny. "Only case I've had was that guy that wanted a divorce, and he gums the works by getting fresh with the corespondent. Me and the outraged wife arrived at the room just as the gal friend crowns him with a chair and beats him down with the telephone. The lug decides he might just as well stay married if being single is going to be like that."

The girl sighed. "And we're getting married."

"Getting married," Quinny echoed faintly. "But I'll get a break. I'd like to get in on a front-page murder case—just once. After that you can have the homicide squad. Like you say, though, we'll cut down on room rent—getting married."

"That's one of the main ideas," the girl agreed, pushing her chair back. "And I guess we'd better be getting at it. The dishes can wait till after the ceremony. You go down and wait in the lobby while I put on my wedding gown."

"Wedding gown? Say—"

"Wedding gown," affirmed Joan, her lips tight. "Tomorrow it will be my spring suit. Next spring, too, very likely. Scram."

QUINNY stepped out into the hall from Room 508 and paused to light one of Joan's cigarettes. Then he started for the elevator. He didn't make

it. As he was about to pass a stairway leading to the top floor—which had no elevator service—a series of violent screams brought him to an abrupt halt. Shrieks and screams weren't unusual in the Du Nord, but seldom occurred in the daytime, and Quinny had never heard any from the top floor. This floor was taken up entirely by the apartment of Louis Lothrop, the theatrical producer.

With the thought that detectives never get anywhere by minding their own business, Quinny went on up the dingy stairway to the sixth floor, and, finding the door to the apartment at the head of the stairs wide open, he walked into a little hall, glancing to the right, where the noise seemed to be coming from.

A queer, misshapen figure leaned in a doorway leading to another room in the front of the apartment. He recognized the woman as a hotel maid.

"Emily!" exclaimed Quinny. "What in hell are you screeching about?"

"Mr. Lothrop—he's dead," she muttered throatily.

"Well, you've seen dead people before, haven't you? Without screaming?"

"Désirée la Fond—she's dead, too. They're both dead—and they're sitting there looking at each other! Oh, my God!" She covered her eyes with a grimy forearm.

Quinny came to the doorway where the maid was standing and looked into the room beyond. It was considerably longer than it was wide, and in the center was a table dressed for a party, but disheveled, as though the party were over. It was. At one end of the table sat the figure of a man dressed in an extravagant version of court costume, leaning back in his chair and staring vacantly at the woman who sat at the other end. She also was in costume, a stage interpretation of the Directoire gown—a scandalous creation in its day. Her slender hand clutched the stem of a wineglass on the table, and her eyes returned the gaze of her companion with equal fixity.

A phonograph on a small table near the front wall ground steadily on, insisting "I only live, my love, when you're alone with me." But it was quite mistaken.

They were both dead.

II.

"WHAT happened?" asked Quinny, turning to the maid.

"I don't know, Mr. Hite. Louis—Mr. Lothrop asked me to come today and clean up. He was going to have a party last night. So—I came up just a few minutes ago. I heard the phonograph and looked in there—and I saw them—she and him. I knew they were dead—"

"How'd you know that, Emily?" queried the detective.

"They—didn't move or anything. And it's nearly noon. They wouldn't be sitting—"

"They're dead, all right. Wait—I'll shut that damn phonograph off. It's giving me the willies." He walked gingerly into the room, around the

table to the phonograph, and stopped it.

"Who did you say the dame was?" asked Quinny, returning to the doorway.

"Désirée la Fond."

"Used to be in the show business, didn't she?" he asked. He had been a reluctant student in P. S. 441 in 1908, but the name stirred somewhere in his memory.

"She"—Emily hesitated, and her large black eyes rolled in an effort at expression—"she was wonderful—once."

Quin Hite stared at the figure of the dead woman.

"That dress," continued Emily, "is the costume she wore in 'The Girl from Dieppe.'"

"Go down and get Brenning," commanded Quinny. Hugh Brenning was the hotel manager. "Skip."

Emily disappeared down the stairs to the hotel.

Quin stuck his hands in his trousers pocket and walked into the drawing room. He went first to Lothrop. A nasty smear just forward of the dead man's right ear indicated the entrance of a bullet. It could hardly be called a hole—it was more of a ragged gash.

"Softy," murmured the detective, wrinkling his forehead and pushing his hat back. It wasn't meant to be a reflection on the dead man. The reference was to the bullet—soft-nosed. He walked around the table to look at the woman. She leaned back in her chair much as did her companion at the other end of the table, her head against its back. Quinny stooped and stared intently at her eyes—eyes that stared back at him without expression. He straightened again and scratched the tip of his nose. A neat bullet hole in the center of her forehead was evidence enough of the cause of her death.

The detective glanced back at Lothrop, who sat in pretty much the same position, save that his hands were in his lap and his head was supported by one of the wings of the high-backed chair in a restful pose. Quinny's forehead wrinkled anew as he considered the two figures.

"It don't add up," he thought; "it couldn't be like this—and it is!"

A teakwood box on the disordered table contained cigarettes. Quinny fished one out and lighted it—with his own match—and then surveyed the table. Six places were set, and all had been used. A silver chafing dish stood at the end occupied by the host, the cover removed. The detective inspected its contents, but his culinary education was insufficient to tell him that it contained the remains of lobster à la Newburg.

A large photograph on a fragile desk in a corner caught his eye. He went over and looked at it. It was signed flourishly: "To Louis, my good friend Louis.—Désirée la Fond," and below the signature, "April 18, 1908." Quinny glanced at the signer.

"Baby, you had it then," he murmured regretfully.

The other end of the drawing room was a step higher than the rest, supporting a very large black grand piano. On the piano was a large group

photograph, and Quinny crossed over to look at it. It was a "flashlight" from a show, and this dead woman was in the very center of it, wearing the costume she had on now. On her right was Lothrop, smiling, also in the costume he now wore in this last scene of his life. Quinny inspected the photograph in detail, then sauntered back to the table. A humidor filled with cigars drew his attention, and he absently stuffed several into his breast pocket.

"Queerest set-up for a murder I've been in on yet," he reflected as he went back to the doorway. "Looks like it happened thirty years ago and just now got uncovered. Maybe the tabs won't eat it up!"

Feet thumped on the stairs and Brenning appeared in the short hall, a little stout man who perspired easily and was doing it.

"What is it, Mr. Hite?" he wheezed. "Emily tells me there is—bad business—up here."

"Murder—two murders," replied Quinny. "Lou Lothrop's been knocked off, and a dame named La Fond. In there. Want to see the bodies? You never saw anything like this."

Brenning considered the invitation but briefly. "Well, no," he replied. "I guess that's a matter for the police."

"They might be interested, at that," returned Quinny with faint sarcasm in his voice. "Come on in and take a look."

"No, I'd rather not," declined Brenning, searching for a handkerchief to wipe his forehead, which certainly needed it. "I don't like to look at dead people."

"They aren't pretty, but you get used to 'em after a while," commented the detective. "I'll handle this business, if you say so."

"I wish you would, Mr. Hite."

"This apartment doesn't rate as part of the hotel, does it?"

"No, thank goodness," affirmed Brenning. "When the hotel was built, Louis Lothrop took the top floor and had it made into an apartment for himself because it was right back of his theater. The hotel's changed hands two or three times since then, but his lease has always been with the property owners—not the hotel. I guess that lets the Du Nord out."

"It won't let it out of the publicity, if that's what you're thinking of," grinned Quinny. "You want me to handle the cops?"

"If you will."

"I will." Quinny pulled his derby down over his gray eyes. "I'll go downstairs and make the call."

Quinny had some ideas that called for a certain amount of privacy. He had, in fact, begun to see where he might make a bit of change out of this affair. He left Brenning reluctantly guarding the stairway while he went to Joan's room to telephone. He found the bride sitting on the edge of the bed, all dressed up—and seething with indignation.

"Well, bridegroom, where have you been?" she demanded. "I've been downstairs twice, looking for you. I thought you'd run out on me."

"There's a murder upstairs," said Quinny. "Lothrop and a dame named Dizzy la Fond. Looks like Quinny can make a little dough."

Joan got up. "Murder or no murder, we've got a date to get married. Come on."

"Oh, nix, Jones. We'll have to wait till tomorrow. I can't pass this up. Ought to be a stack of rubles in this—enough to put on a honeymoon in Niagara Falls." Quinny picked up the phone and gave a number to the hotel clerk. "Don't worry about the wedding, Jones. It'll come off just as soon as I finish this murder business. It's a break, sugar, and if I work it right we'll put on a wedding that is a wedding. We'll have the police band knock out the wedding march and a hot combo from Harlem play the exit music. We'll have— Oh, hello. *Observer*? . . . City desk. . . . Yes, dimples, Mr. Parker, and when did they start calling him mister? . . . Hello, Mr. Parker? . . . This is Mr. Hite. . . . Yeah, Quinny to some."

Quinny glanced at Joan and winked skillfully.

"Yeah, I know you're busy, but you're going to be busier. How much *Observer* dough for a tip on a stop-press murder? . . . You tell Quinny how many skins and he'll break the information. You better hurry up, too, because it won't keep long. . . . No, the cops aren't in on it yet. Make it fifty bucks and I'll give you five minutes' head start over the cops. I've got to call them, but I'll let 'em find out who it is after they get here. That'll give you plenty of time over the other papers, see? . . . Fifty bucks, O. K. Louis Lothrop and Dizzy—"

"Désirée," corrected Joan.

"Wait a minute," said Quinny into the telephone. He turned his head toward the girl. "What did you say?"

"It's not 'Dizzy'—it's 'Désirée.'" She pronounced each syllable slowly and clearly.

"Oh, fancy stuff, eh?" He returned to the telephone. "Correction. The name is Deseeray la Fond. You get? . . . Louis Lothrop and Deseeray la Fond, both shot in Lothrop's apartment over the Du Nord. Send the fifty up with whoever you send to cover the job—and explain that none of that dough better get mixed up with his personal funds. I'll phone you later. Go to it. In five minutes I'll call Centre Street."

Quinny restored the phone to the rickety table top, pushed his derby back from his forehead, and lighted one of the late Louis Lothrop's excellent cigars. He beamed at Joan.

"No so bad, Jones," he said. "Fifty little strangers on their way home to daddy. Not bad for a starter, eh?"

"I never heard of anyone making money out of a murder," replied Joan. "Are you sure you won't get into more trouble? I thought a person had to notify the police first when a murder is discovered."

"No dough in telling the cops first, and there's no law about it."

His call to Centre Street was brief, merely saying that a murder had



been discovered in the Du Nord, that he'd wait for them in the apartment, that he thought the victims were important people, and that he wouldn't touch anything. Not a thing. He hung up and emptied his breast pocket of the cigars with the reflection that he'd better get a few more while the getting was easy.

"I'll be back as soon as I can get away," Quinny said to the disconsolate Joan. He started for the door; then, as though from afterthought, came back to the bed, tilted the girl's face and kissed her. "Don't worry about that wedding, Jones. Start figuring out what kind of spangles you want to wear. And when you get done thinking about that, work on the idea of where we eat tonight. We'll eat high, at some place that has cloth napkins."

He grinned, touched his derby and disappeared through the door.

III.

HUGH BRENNING was waiting on the stairs where Quinny had left him. The detective suggested that the hotel manager go downstairs to the lobby and wait for the police, probably by this time on their way. As Brenning disappeared, Quinny walked back into the apartment with the intention of having a look at the premises before the influx of police made it difficult.

The library came first—the room to the right of the stairway entrance where he had found Emily, the maid. Standing on the top of one section of the bookcases was a bronze bust of Theodore Roosevelt, campaign hat, neckerchief, and all, while crossed on the wall overhead were two military rifles. Quinny stood on one of the chairs for a closer inspection of the weapons. Krag-Jorgensens, both of them, and in a small bronze frame just beneath the guns was Quartermaster

Sergeant Louis Lothrop's honorable discharge from the First Volunteer Cavalry, dated September 15, 1898.

As he started to get down from the chair he noticed something lying on top of the bookcase, wrapped in a piece of silk. He picked it up and, unrolling the silk, found it to be a slender black stick. A baton, he decided. Not, perhaps, an extraordinary object to be found in a theatrical producer's sanctum, but why should it be wrapped in a piece of silk and laid on top of the bookcase? The dust-covered bookcase top showed that it had been put there recently. More curious was the piece of silk, about the size of a man's scarf, which is what Quinny would have supposed it was but for the color scheme. It was half red and half white. Thinking it might be something belonging to a woman, he smelled it for perfume. It yielded only the faint odor of camphor.

The short hall into which the stairway opened led from the library to the dining room, in which, for the moment, Quinny seemed to find nothing of interest. A door farther down the wall at his left as he faced the rear of the building opened into another hallway which ran straight through to the back. Next to the dining room was the kitchen, but, oddly enough, there was no connecting door, merely a windowlike opening in the wall back of the buffet. Apparently things coming from the kitchen had to be pushed through this hole, and in case there was but one servant he would then come into the dining room via the hallway to serve. Cumbersome, Quinny thought.

He examined the kitchen from the doorway, but did not enter. It had about the usual appearance of a small kitchen after a party. There were probably no end of clues to be found there, but he didn't feel he had sufficient time.

Across the hall was a rather large bathroom, with marble-topped wash-basin and a bathtub supported by ornate legs. The one other item seemed adequate.

He crossed the hall again and looked into the last room on that side. "Lothrop's bedroom," he murmured.

The closet door was open, and Quinny crossed the room to get a quick look at what was in it. It was, to his mind, unreasonably full of clothing, including several fancy costumes. What he at first mistook for a rug proved on closer inspection to be some sort of animal costume. The head was on the shelf, and after staring at it for a moment or so he decided that it might be meant for some kind of dog. A yellow smear on what would be a front leg of the animal caught his eye, and he leaned forward to smell it. Whatever odor the smear might have had, it was overpowered by that of moth balls.

Since the chamber evidently had not been occupied more than momentarily by anyone, after being cleaned, it would take a closer examination than he had time for to develop anything of interest. So the detective returned to the drawing room.

His first action here was to replenish his depleted breast pocket from

Lothrop's humidor. Then he had a look at the contents of the chafing dish to see if this matched up at all with the smear on the dog costume. It was the same color, anyway, he decided. Remembering something, he went over to have another look at the group photograph on the piano. Yes, there it was, a man in the group dressed in a costume very similar to the one hanging in the closet—a man with a round, chubby face and closely cropped hair. He held the headpiece of the costume on his arm in the manner of one holding a top hat.

On the wall back of the piano hung a framed theater program, and Quinny went over to read it. In the cast of characters, Quinny noted:

Peppo, the Dog.....Carlo Ralph

"I guess that thing in the closet must be Peppo's outfit—Carlo Ralph. And what does that prove? Not much—anybody could have worn it last night. But I got a feeling that the name of the guy who did this is in that list. I dunno why."

The tread of solidly shod feet sounded in the hall below. Glancing down at his breast pocket to make sure nothing contraband was peeking out, he assumed what he hoped was an innocent expression and waited.

First to appear was Inspector Pierson, Quinny's immediate superior previous to the disastrous raid on the dice game. Right over Pierson's shoulder loomed a face that Quinny didn't care for—Deputy Commissioner Murton. He *would* come, thought Quinny. Behind Murton there was a battalion of lesser-fry detectives, photographers, and department experts. Quinny stood up.

"Hello, there—Hite," greeted the commissioner affably. "Glad to see that you haven't lost all your sense of public responsibility. Very good of you to call us promptly."

"Well, there wasn't much use keeping it a secret," replied Quinny. "And I didn't know anybody else to call up."

"You said the victims were persons of importance, I believe," observed the commissioner as he reached the top of the stairs, where Quinny had retreated into the little hallway.

"Maybe—Lou Lothrop and Di—Deseeray la Fond."

"Lou Lothrop," mused Pierson. "Why, I used to laugh myself sick at him and Dave Earle back in the nineteen hundreds. And I can remember when that woman had every guy on Broadway dizzy."

Quinny followed them into the room of the crime. Pierson and the commissioner inspected the bodies, while Quinny leaned negligently in the doorway, watching them.

"Shot," observed Murton.

"In the head," supplemented Quinny guilelessly.

Murton eyed him with suspicion. "Obviously," he replied.

"From a distance, eh, inspector?" said Quinny. "No powder marks, no burns."

"You looked 'em over?" asked Pierson, as though accusing Quinny of peeking.

"That much," admitted Quinny.

"What else did you see?" demanded Murton.

"Nothing much," admitted Quinny. "But I guess if I took a look around I might see a lot. I'm no amateur at this business—only at raiding crap games."

Murton smiled sourly.

"Hite, you were one of our best men, and if it weren't for your incurable chiseling, you'd still be," he said.

"I wasn't one of your best men, commissioner. I was the best one—easy," Quinny asserted with some feeling and no modesty. "You don't mean I got swung for chiseling. Hell, everybody chisels a little—even you. What you mean is that I got out of my district and stuffed the wrong guy in the wagon. How'd I know he'd turn out to be the D. A.'s brother-in-law on a dice binge?"

Murton compressed his lips and Quinny continued:

"Do you have a brother-in-law with a yen for data, commissioner? I'd like to know so's I won't make any bum plays in my private work."

"I haven't any gambling relatives, Hite, if you insist. You may stick around this affair if you like, if you think it will do you any good. I'll see that you get a little publicity"—Quinny was sure he'd take better care of this himself—"and if you give us anything really helpful—well, come down and see me. What do you say, inspector?"

"O. K. with me," agreed Pierson, smiling slightly as if to himself. "But no snitching news to the papers that I don't want snitched."

"Me—*me* snitch!" exclaimed Quinny in tones of deep horror at the very suggestion. "Not a peep, not a whisper. I'll stick around, and I'm doing you a favor, plenty. Let's go to work on the murder. I'll give you something to start with: you'll both be nuts before you get through with it. I'll give you something else, too. You already found out that these two have been shot through, or in, anyway, the head. After the doc gets finished here he'll tell you they was shot with different guns."

Pierson rubbed his chin thoughtfully; Murton stared at Quinny with doubt.

"Take a look at the wounds," directed Quinny. "The bullet that hit Lothrop was a soft-nose—the other shot made a clean hole. Any rookie would see that. There's some other funny stuff about those bullet holes. I'll tell you what I think when you get through looking the joint over."

IV.

THE examination was far more thorough than the quick survey Quinny had made. He didn't help much, merely following the commissioner and

Inspector Pierson around. He did rediscover the silk-wrapped baton in the library, however.

The bathroom yielded nothing. The only item of interest in the servant's room was a contraption that struck Quinny as curious. This was a piece of wood about two feet long by six inches wide, which the inspector found in the drawer of a discarded commode. There were two small hoops, not more than three inches in diameter, fastened diagonally to the piece of board in an upright position. The hoops were about twenty inches apart, and on the top of each was attached a flashlight bulb, wired to a battery. A cheap switch controlled them, and both bulbs lighted when the switch was closed by the inspector. He turned the thing over to see what was on the bottom of the board. There wasn't anything to indicate what the device could be used for. The board had evidently been cut from a longer piece of used lumber, as, beginning at one end, the stenciled letters NE appeared, followed by the numeral 3.

"What the hell do you suppose this is for?" he growled, blinking the lights on and off.

"Got me." Quinny hadn't an inkling what it was for, but he had some other ideas about it.

The commissioner opined that it was some sort of experimental stage device. Anyhow, they'd preserve it for the fingerprint boys in case it turned out to be something else. The men went on to Lothrop's bedroom.

All the clothing in the closet was brought out, inspected, and piled on the bed. Quinny pointed out the yellow smear on the sleeve—or leg—of the animal costume and voiced his thought that it had got there during the party. There seemed nothing else in the closet relevant to the crime, and they went into the kitchen. Quinny leaned in the doorway and studied the little room for his own use. He eyed the case of whiskey regretfully.

Then, as if inspired by something, he entered the room and peered through the service opening into the dining room. He got a fairly comprehensive view through the orifice, and beyond that saw the raised portion of the drawing room, with the grand piano beyond the railing which separated the dining room from that part of the drawing room. But more important to his line of thought, he could see the late Lou Lothrop quite easily, although the woman at the other end of the table was out of sight.

He examined the top of the cabinet which stood between him and the window—more of a bench than a cabinet, although it had drawers underneath. There might have been a bit of lobster spilled here, but there wasn't. The table was remarkably clear of the usual kitchen paraphernalia. There were some screw holes where some sort of kitchen machine might have been fastened down. Quinny hunted around, but could find no trace of a mixer or food chopper, or anything of the sort. Another thing that gave him a minute or two of bootless speculation was a screw-eye in the edge of the bench.

"I guess that's all in here until the fingerprint men get through," said

Pierson, bending over and sniffing at the pot which had evidently contained the lobster. "We'll go back to the living room—maybe the doctor has showed up by now. I'd like to know what he makes of those bullet holes."

Dr. Goldberg, assistant medical examiner, was in the drawing room when they reached it.

"Well, what have you got to tell us, doctor?" queried Murton.

"They been dead already maybe tan, maybe twelve hours," answered Dr. Goldberg. He looked at his wrist watch. "Maybe between two and four o'clock this morning, yet. No powder boins—maybe I find some later. I don't see before a bullet hole like the gentleman has got in his head."

"Ever been in a war, doctor?" asked Quinny.

"No—when it was the last war I was too yonk," explained Dr. Goldberg. "I was already yet in the medical college."

"If you had been in the war before this one instead of in medical college, you would have seen lots of bullet holes like that one in Lothrop's head," Quinny said, as one expounding a great and bravely won wisdom. The closest he had ever been to a battlefield was Camp Yaphank. He might have got farther but for a little commercial idea he had worked up wherein he had a lot of passes printed, which he sold to the boys wishing to go to town at the reasonable price of twenty-five cents, or five for a dollar. Including the commanding officer's signature, which that person would never have recognized as his own. That detail didn't matter, as the true signature was too seldom seen by the sentries.

"Well, I guess you can take 'em away, then," said Pierson.

"Who discovered the bodies, Hite? Not you?"

"The maid down in the hotel found 'em," replied Quinny. The derby went back off his forehead. "She says she came up to clean up after the party."

"Party?" queried Murton.

"Yeah—Lothrop had a party last night. Fancy costumes, it looks like. I thought you had that all figured out."

"I did," lied the commissioner. "Well, inspector, I guess we'd better have the maid up, eh?"

"I know the woman," replied Quinny. "She knows me. She's a dope and a liquor head, and if you want to get anything straight out of her, don't scare her. She won't be scared of me."

"O. K. Go get her. No funny business, though. Get me?"

"I don't know where you fellows get the idea that everything I do isn't strictly on the flat." Quinny moved toward the doorway. "Lousy, I call it."

After a good bit of button pushing the venerable elevator arrived at the fifth floor and the detective embarked on a jerky passage to the lower floor. Emily, the operator informed him, would probably be in her room on the ground floor, off the lobby. The lobby, incidentally, was full of newspaper-men, he added.

"Is there a guy from the *Observer*?" queried Quinny.

News hounds all looked alike to the elevator operator. He brought the car to a bouncing stop at the ground floor.

Quinny looked around the lobby, crowded with a strange collection of men, some of them with cameras hanging from their shoulders.

"I'm Quin Hite," he announced. "Any of you guys want to see me?"

"I do," spoke up a lanky gentleman. He came toward the elevator. "I got a note for you." He handed the detective an envelope which that worthy put away in an inside pocket.

"I'll read it later," he said.

"Spill me something," suggested the tall stranger, his eyes big with anticipation.

"Roll your own. Lothrop and La Fond killed about two or three o'clock this morning. Shot. After a big party—Broadway big shots—aw, you know. Make it yourself. I'm busy. Be seeing you, though—later."

He found Emily's room, a dingy, unkempt cell, its only light and air coming from an air shaft which at this level resembled the bottom of a well. An exceedingly secondhand phonograph stood on a rickety table. The thing even had a horn, something Quinny hadn't seen since he was a little boy. Emily was sitting on the edge of a narrow iron cot, her head in her hands and her black hair straggling down over them. She raised luminous black eyes as he opened the door and eyed him with faint curiosity.

"'Lo, Mr. Hite," she mumbled.

"They want you upstairs, Emily," said Quinny softly. "Nothing to be scared of." He lifted the record from the phonograph, read the song title—"Desire Me—A Waltz"—and put it back. Music wasn't up his alley.

"I'm not scared, Mr. Hite," replied the woman throatily. "I haven't been scared, or anything, in a long time. I—"

"Tell me about it later, Emily. We're friends, you know. I ain't saying nothing. Tell those birds upstairs anything you want, but tell 'em the truth—what you do tell. If you want to hold out anything, well, you better hold it out for me. Catch on?"

Emily swallowed convulsively. "All right. Let's go up and see the bulls."

They found Murton and Pierson sitting in the dining room.

"Emily," introduced Quinny briefly. "I'll get you a chair."

Pierson lighted a cigarette and cleared his throat.

"What's your name—full name?" he asked.

"Emily"—the woman hesitated—"Jackson."

"You live here in the hotel, I suppose?"

"If you call it living," she replied drearily.

"You found these bodies—tell me about it."

"Not much to tell. I came up to clean the joint—"

"Is that part of your job—cleaning up here?" interrupted Pierson.

"No—only sometimes when Mr. Lothrop has a party. I—"

"Did he have many parties?" put in the commissioner, not liking to be

left out of the conversation.

"No. He had this one once a year, on the same date. It started after his first show, 'The Girl from Dieppe,' had run eight months, and was partly a housewarming for this apartment. It was new then. The party was for the cast of the show."

Quinny noted Emily's improved diction. Ordinarily she spoke in the patois of Ninth Avenue, if she spoke at all. She had a series of grunts that served the purpose of speech on most occasions.

"I see," commented Pierson. "Well, go on. You came up to clean the apartment. You have a key to get in?"

"No—the door wasn't locked. I came up and started to go into the front room. I saw them—that's all—it's all kinda foggy after that, and the next thing I saw was this guy—I mean Mr. Hite—standing in the entrance to the stairs. I started to scream again—I guess I had been lettin' off before, but I don't remember it—and then he spoke to me. He sent me after Mr. Brenning."

Pierson nodded casually. "That's all you know about this, eh?" he asked. Emily nodded. "Go back to your job. I'll send for you if I need you—and meanwhile, don't you leave the hotel."

Quinny looked at the inspector, apparently surprised. "Wait a minute," he broke in. "Who does clean this place? Regular, I mean."

"Al, the night stage doorman at the Athena," answered the maid, staring at Quinny as if she hadn't seen him before.

"Why not after a party?" demanded Quinny.

Emily's yellow teeth showed in a ghastly smile. "Ask Mr. Lothrop."

"And look here," pursued Quinny vigorously, "you said the stairway door wasn't locked. Do you mean that the door was left unlocked all the time the party was going on? Did he usually leave it unlocked for you to get in?"

"I don't know how it was during the party, but he always left it unlocked for me to come up. I mean when he wanted me to clean. He never wanted me any other time."

"Does that seem important to you, Hite?" queried the commissioner. His tone indicated that he didn't think it was.

"Maybe," answered Quinny. "If that's the way he usually did. If he left the door unlocked all during the party, it'll take from now to Christmas to question everybody who could have come up through the hotel and knocked him and the dame off. If he did keep it locked and meant to unlock it just before he went to bed for Emily to get in—well, he never went to bed. So it wouldn't have been him that unlocked it. Maybe, though, like you say, it's not important, but for me it's a lot too early to say what's important and what ain't important."

"You may be right, of course," acknowledged the commissioner. He dismissed the maid with a nod and wave of his hand, watched her cross the room toward the stairway without a glance at the dreadful sight in the draw-

ing room to her left. The commissioner began speaking again:

"As I see it, this case has the same earmarks as those headaches, the Elwell and Dorothy King cases. Spectacular, of course. But in the end we'll find ourselves in the same spot as our predecessors did in those cases. Murder, by person or persons unknown. In other words, a prowler."

Inspector Pierson shot a quick glance at Commissioner Murton. Quinny raised him. He gulped noisily.

"You got it, commissioner, got it first crack," he exploded. "Great! Now all you gotta do is send the boys out to pick up the first hood they see packin' a high-power rifle and a six-shooter on his hip."

"A rifle?" exclaimed the commissioner, a bit disconcerted. "What rifle?"

"The rifle that put that soft-nose slug in Lothrop's head," Quinny said firmly. "*That* didn't come out of no hand gun."

V.

THE commissioner frowned doubtfully at Quinny. Quinny didn't object—he'd been frowned at by bigger shots than the commissioner.

"It remains to be proven whether a rifle was used or not," disputed Murton. "A soft-nose bullet isn't necessarily fired from a rifle, you know."

"I've never heard of a soft-nose bullet made for a pistol. I don't say bullets like that might not be made for some foreign guns, like a Mauser or Luger pistol, but they wouldn't be easy to get hold of in this country," Quinny argued.

"I'm not convinced that one or perhaps both weren't placed at the table after death," pondered Murton. "The scene is too theatrical to have happened as it appears."

"I can convince you, commissioner," said Quinny. "If you will go take a look, you'll see a cigar in Lothrop's hand with an ash about an inch long. You couldn't move him without the ash falling off. And the woman—she has her fingers around the wineglass, and she's got cigarette ashes in her lap. Go look."

"Very well, Hite—I'll take your word for it—but now explain to me why they just sat there like that and allowed themselves to be murdered without turning a hair, as one might say." Commissioner Murton smiled triumphantly at the inspector.

"What good is guessing? Let's figure what we know." Quinny leaned back, crossed his legs and gave the derby a little shove away from his forehead. "Lothrop was shot in the side of the head. He was dead before he knew what hit him. It's easy to see why he didn't move—he probably didn't see the killer. But it's different with the dame. She got it smack in the center of the forehead. But that don't say she saw the shooter; if the shots went off at the same time, she would have been dead before she had time to look up, if she happened to be looking down. Didn't you ever notice that when people are sitting drinking at a table they either look at each other or

at the tablecloth? Add that all up and it looks as though the shots were fired at the same time, and also that neither one of the people killed saw the killer—or killers."

"Fairly good reasoning," the commissioner commented. "But I have an exception to make: The murderer—or murderers—may have been known to the victims, and the latter may have known no reason to suspect murderous intent."

"Well," considered Quinny, "hardly anybody, outside of robbery, is ever murdered by a total stranger. The only way I can go along with your idea is that the killers pulled their guns and the victims thought it was a gag. Horseplay, you know."

Inspector Pierson nodded his head. "Yeah, that's a possible idea," he observed.

Several men came trooping through the dining room on their way out with the bodies, hidden from sight in large bags made for the purpose. Commissioner Murton took one look and found interest in a steel engraving high on the other wall. Bodies being carried about in canvas bags like so much soiled laundry were infinitely more gruesome than corpses seated at the table, somehow.

"The last curtain," murmured Quinny, morosely eying the procession. "And they're taking no bows."

Pierson got a cigarette from a rather crumpled package he found in his coat pocket. "Anybody got a match?" he asked. Quinny struck one for him, then returned to his chair.

"It's time we got somebody in here that knew these people," the inspector said, puffing vigorously. "How about Lothrop—was he married?"

Quinny said he thought he was, or had been, and suggested a look at the little telephone book he had seen in Lothrop's bedchamber. The inspector got up and disappeared in that direction. Quinny touched off one of Joan's cigarettes and wondered vaguely what she was doing. Silence reigned until the inspector's return.

"I got her," he announced. "Name's Phyllis. She's coming right over."

"How did she take the news?" asked Murton. He leaned over and dusted his shoes with his handkerchief, then straightened his tie. You can see where his mind is, thought Quinny.

"Why, she didn't seem much upset," replied the inspector. "Just interested. Wanted to know right away who killed him."

Quinny chuckled hoarsely. "You didn't tell her, did you?"

"I'm leaving that for you." Pierson smiled tolerantly.

"How about sending for Dave Earle? He might give us something to work on," Quinny suggested. "He might even have been at the party. He was in that show."

Murton decided he would call Earle himself, since he was slightly acquainted with Lothrop's former partner. He left for the bedroom. Inspector Pierson walked into the library with the expressed intention of going through

a desk he'd seen there. Quinny tagged along. He'd been secretly dying for a look at that desk in private, but hadn't been able to figure out any way of doing it.

Both Quinny and Pierson were disappointed at the result of their inspection, which developed nothing of interest but a check book. They skimmed through the stubs to see what he had been spending, and, so far as possible, what for. The only item that seemed interesting was one charged to "Cash" every Friday, for thirty dollars. There were other stubs marked "Cash," but they were for differing amounts and did not occur with any regularity.

"Looks like he was handing out thirty bucks for something every Friday," commented Quinny. "So far as I know, he didn't hire anybody regular—unless maybe the doorman at the theater—to clean the apartment. That wouldn't pay thirty dollars a week, hardly. See if there are any returned checks in the desk."

There weren't.

The commissioner came into the library, and said:

"I got Earle on the phone. He should be here in a few minutes, I think. Nice fellow, Earle."

"Pal of yours?" asked Quinny.

"Well, hardly that," replied Murton. "I've met him a few times—here and there."

"He's been in both places," nodded Quinny, toying with an idea unconnected with murder solution. "And I hear two kinds of stories about him."

"What kind of stories?" asked Pierson.

"Good and bad. Actors he hires say he's swell, and the ones he passes up say he is a louse. Say, commissioner, there's nearly a whole case of good-looking rye whiskey there in the kitchen, and I bet you even up there'll be a siphon or so in the icebox. The liquor's no good for evidence now, and this is probably the dustiest apartment in Manhattan. What do you think? I got more arguments in reserve." Quinny eyed the commissioner hopefully.

"I shall be providentially blind for the next few minutes," said the commissioner loftily.

VI.

DAVID EARLE arrived at the apartment before Mrs. Lothrop, as had been expected, since his office was in nearby Forty-fourth Street. What had not been expected was that he would provide information of another entrance to the apartment which so far had been overlooked. He came from the Athena roof, over an inclosed bridge leading to the rear hall of the apartment.

David Earle was short and somewhat stout, about fifty-five or sixty years of age. He greeted the commissioner cordially, nodded uncertainly to Pierson and glanced at Quinny, then sat down in the designated chair, resting his elbows on the arms and clasping his hands together. He didn't seem to be at all nervous, Quinny thought.

"This is a pretty sad business to me, commissioner," said Earle. "While Lou and I were never particularly intimate friends, our affairs were tied together for a good many years. We started out in show business together—right after the Spanish-American War, in '98. We were in the Rough Riders—that's where I met Lou, as a matter of fact."

"What broke you up—as partners, I mean?" asked Pierson.

"Well, I guess we were both ambitious. We'd been together as a comedy team for several years, musical comedy and vaudeville in between. Lou didn't like acting. He was more for the business side, and at that time he was way ahead of me. Frankly, in those days I liked the glitter and applause. I liked to hear them laugh, and I liked the music and I liked the after-theater life. The era was passing, but, like everyone else, I didn't realize it. Lou had the production bug—didn't want to act any more, and didn't after 'The Girl from Dieppe.' Of course he promoted it—I wasn't in on either the show or the theater."

"But you went in for producing yourself," observed Murton.

"Later. And here's a funny thing: when I did go in for it, I did better over the long haul than he did. Lou couldn't change. He kept on producing the same type of show as 'The Girl from Dieppe' year after year, and the vogue ran out on him. He wouldn't use any theater except his own—the Athena—until the time came when he couldn't get a backer. He had to sublet it to a burlesque outfit. The theater trade—what there was left of it—moved uptown and left Lou behind, sort of moldering away in this flat. He never realized it, though. Lou believed right up to yesterday, anyhow, that it was merely a question of time before he startled Broadway with another smash hit—like 'The Girl.' And he was still interested in his lady friends. Plenty."

"He had a party here last night—" began Commissioner Murton. Earle interrupted.

"Yes. I was here. He had this party every year, you know. Started with 'The Girl' when he broke into this apartment. We came to that first



party dressed in our costumes—and what a party, even for those days." Earle paused, a reminiscent light shining in his blue eyes.

"Was there a guy in a dog suit—the first time?" asked Quinny.

"Why, yes." Earle stared at Quinny curiously. "Carlo Ralph—he did a bit in the show. Odd sort of duck, but very charming if he chose to be. Guess I haven't seen him in twenty years."

"Maybe he was here last night. Anyhow, a dog suit was," said Quinny.

"There was no one here in a dog costume while I was here," said the ex-comedian, wrinkling his funny little nose, "but I didn't stay very long. I supposed that Carlo Ralph was dead, but if it turns out that he was here last night, it should be interesting—highly interesting to you fellows. You see, Ralph was married to La Fond at the time 'The Girl' opened. If this murder had happened then, I would certainly have suspected Carlo Ralph. If ever a man hated another, Ralph hated Lou. Lou had a decided weakness for a pretty face, and La Fond had one. Carlo Ralph and Company was at that time a big vaudeville magic act—both in the United States and abroad. Everywhere, I guess—he'd played all over Europe, Africa, and even Australia. He'd picked up this La Fond girl somewhere, married her, and then had the bad luck to be on the same bill with Lothrop and Earle. Lou got interested in her—he was working on the idea for 'The Girl' at the time—and later engaged the act for the show purely to get her under contract. Carlo Ralph had ideas of being a great actor, and seized this opportunity to abandon magic and vaudeville to branch out into another field."

"What happened to him?" queried the commissioner.

"The same thing that happens to lots of husbands with pretty wives," answered Earle, smiling. "Lou's interest in the woman got personal—after the show opened—and she didn't seem to object. At the same time he cut Ralph's part in the show to a miserable bit, hoping he would quit. But Ralph didn't quit. It was terrible. Playing that insignificant dog bit for a season finished Carlo Ralph as a vaudeville attraction. Then there was Lou's current girl friend in the chorus—a pretty little empty-head named—let me see—yes, Lynn Evans. Between the four of them—Lou, La Fond, Ralph and the Evans girl—life backstage wasn't what you'd call dull."

"This Evans girl, is she still in show business?" asked Pierson.

"Oh, hardly!" ejaculated Earle. "She'd be too old now for the theater. She was just good-looking. No talent—not a career girl."

"Désirée la Fond," began the commissioner slowly. "What was she? French, I suppose, from the name."

"No, I think not. She might have been Dutch or German—possibly Alsatian. I don't remember what her real name was, if I ever knew. But it wasn't La Fond. That was a name Lou thought up for her."

"Did she return to her husband after 'The Girl' finished its run?" asked the commissioner.

"No, she didn't. She was a star in her own right after 'The Girl' for several years—and Ralph was nothing. She also had a shot at pictures, but didn't register there." Earle raised his eyes and stared at the ceiling, his forehead breaking into a network of tiny wrinkles. "As I said, if Carlo Ralph had killed Lou during the run of the show, I don't think anyone would have been surprised. But it doesn't seem likely that he came here last night—after thirty years—and murdered Lou Lothrop and his errant wife."

"Possible, though," the commissioner stated. "Coming here and seeing them together might have renewed all his old bitterness."

Quinny decided that he had been quiet long enough. "From what Mr. Earle says, it don't seem like this Carlo Ralph guy would have ever come near this apartment. A reunion of the cast of the show wouldn't have been anything he'd have wanted to sit in on."

"Might as well skip it. Don't seem to be getting anywhere." The inspector got out his notebook and opened it on his knee. "What time did you come, and what time did you leave, Mr. Earle?"

Earle considered. "I got here about twelve-fifteen, I think—I'm pretty sure about that—and left at one. Oddly enough, he told me the other day that he thought this would be the last one, as he was seriously considering selling his lease on both the apartment and the theater."

"Who was here?" Pierson asked.

"Well, Julian Davess—he was the tenor in the show—and la Fond. You said, commissioner, that she was—ah—dead, too, I think." Earle, for the first time, seemed disturbed, but recovered quickly and went on. "You see, there aren't so many of us left from 'The Girl'—hardly any, in fact."

"Who was here when you left?" asked Pierson.

"Just those two—and Lou, of course."

"Have you any idea who else might have come to the party?" Murton cut in.

Earle considered the question deliberately.

"No," he replied finally. "You say Carlo Ralph was here."

"I said the dog suit was," corrected Quinny. "I don't know who was inside it."

"Not the same thing, of course," agreed Earle. He got up, crossed to the raised end of the living room, and scrutinized the program framed on the wall back of the piano. "Here's the original program of the show; and of the people, Julian Davess, Désirée, Lou, Barney Gillan, Mayday Walters, and myself are the only ones still around—and two of those aren't now. I mean they are the only ones I ever see. Some of the others may be—and perhaps some of the chorus. They—the chorus—don't count, since they weren't included in the original party." He pondered a moment, his mind going back to the gay affair in 1908, when they were all sitting on top of the world and thought their seats permanent. "I believe Lynn Evans was there, though. The only one of the chorus."

"What about these that are still around?" asked the inspector, eying the notebook he held on the arm of his chair.

"Well, there was Julian Davess. He was a South African. Hadn't any local experience to amount to anything. Lou found him singing in a joint down on Sixth Avenue, near the old Haymarket.

"He left the stage a few years after 'The Girl': his voice—and it was a good one—went sour on him. He's a stockbroker downtown now and you wouldn't connect him with the theater, although he's still rather handsome—careful dresser, and all that. Barney Gillan is a character actor, doing old men in about every other show that opens nowadays. Had him in one of mine last season. He's raising a large family in Mount Vernon—doubt very much that he would have been here. Mayday Walters—I don't need to tell you about her. She married a man in the brackets after 'The Girl'—worked at it for a lot of years. Came '29, and she's the little breadwinner singing old-time stuff on the radio. She wouldn't have been here, either."

"*Nobody* came to his party," said Quinny lugubriously. "So the old gent shot himself and his only guest. Let's go home."

"You said that Lothrop, Davess, and the woman were the only ones present when you arrived," said Murton. "What were they doing?"

"Sitting at this table. Lou was doing the honors, of course, with the chafing dish. We had lobster à la Newburg at the first party, and all the parties ever after. It was a rite—to Lou. I don't think he prepared the dish—he could have and did, years back—but he went through the motions. I think it was made beforehand by someone else."

Quinny took the cigar from his mouth.

"Who? I been wondering about that," he asked.

Earle stared at him quizzically. "Well, now you have me. I don't think he kept a servant—in fact, I'm sure he didn't. But I think he had someone in. I wouldn't know who."

"Something for your book, inspector," remarked Quinny, restoring the cigar to his mouth.

"Do you know Lothrop's wife?" questioned the inspector.

"I've met her, but can't say I really know her."

"Anything to tell us about her? She's on her way here, by the way," pursued the inspector. Asking all the usual questions, thought Quinny, and feeling his legs getting weary he poured a round of drinks and sat down on the edge of the platform.

"Not much. Lou married her several years ago—and it's my opinion it was just another promotion for him. She's quite wealthy, and he used her money to back a show. His last one, as a matter of fact. As a marriage I think it was pretty much a washout. Lou was never meant to be a husband."

"But there was no trouble between them?" asked Murton.

"I guess not. You know as much about it as I do. I think he lived here

most of the time, and I know quite well that he was always on the make for a pretty face or figure," replied Earle, with a wry grin.

"Throwing eyes at something of yours?" asked Quinny, sagely.

Earle gave him a tolerant smile. "I've been married happily for twenty-five years. I have a son at Yale and a daughter that can't make up her mind between a career and a husband. You know the age. What of mine is there for a man like Lou to throw eyes at?"

"Is your daughter good-looking?" asked Quinny thoughtfully.

Earle's eyes flashed. "We won't have any of that. Dorothy is not in the show business, and is in no way concerned with the happenings of Times Square, or this affair."

"Did I say she was, Mr. Earle?" asked Quinny, eying the uncovered bottom of his glass. "I just asked if she was good-looking."

"I think Dorothy would be considered a very good-looking young woman," replied Earle.

"That'll be enough on that line, I think, Hite," cautioned Commissioner Murton severely.

"O. K.," responded Quinny, cheerfully and unabashed. "Only one more thing I'd like to ask Mr. Earle."

"Well, ask it," snapped the producer, glaring at Quinny.

"This daughter of yours," asked Hite evenly: "did she happen to know Lou Lothrop?"

"Yes, of course. After all, Lothrop was an old friend of the family." Earle took a sip from his glass. "Is that all?"

"All on that line," Quinny replied indolently.

"We got off the track a little," said the inspector, looking at his notebook. "Going back to Lothrop's wife, who was she before she married Lothrop?"

"Phyllis Haynes," stated Earle. "Daughter of Albert Haynes, who disappeared in the Amazon forests and was never heard of again."

"Must be a big woods," mused Quinny. "What was he doing in it?"

Earle's restless eyes roamed around at Quinny.

"Haynes was an explorer and big-game hunter," he explained.

The commissioner showed a fresh interest. "Did Mrs. Lothrop ever go with him on his hunting trips?"

"That's one I can't answer. As I said a little while ago, I don't know much about her."

A detective stationed at the head of the stairs to the hotel stuck his head around the library doorway. "There's a woman here says she's Mrs. Lothrop," he announced.

"Send her in," the inspector commanded. He glanced at his superior, then turned to Earle.

"We won't keep you any longer, Mr. Earle," he said. "Thanks for your help. If there's anything else, we'll get in touch with you."

VII.

PHYLLIS LOTHROP was about thirty-five, Quinny decided. Her clothes cost dough; nifty but not flashy. Only jewelry visible was a small pin at her throat. Well-rounded figure, but by no means fat. Indications of a bull-headed strain about her mouth. After Earle left, she endured the silent scrutiny of Quinny and the inspector for about twenty seconds.

"Well, why don't you ask me questions?" she demanded. "Or did you just want to look at me? For a quarter you can get more to look at in the burlesque show downstairs."

"We go in for quality," returned Quinny, undisturbed. He got a nice smile for that.

"When did you see Mr. Lothrop last?" Murton asked, coming to the point with commendable promptness.

"Monday afternoon. He came to my apartment for something or other and stopped to talk for a few minutes," she replied. "Told me he was having this party, for one thing."

"I suppose you were asked to come?"

"No. This shindig was not part of our private life. It was for— But all I know is what you told me over the telephone a little while ago. Don't you think you should sort of tell me what happened?"

The commissioner agreed and told her all that had happened, so far as he knew. She shook her head bewilderedly.

"It's all very strange," she commented. "But then, his life here in this apartment was something entirely separate from our life together. You might be surprised to know how few times I've ever been in this place. I came up here one day last week to see if I could drag him out to dinner that night, but it was a wasted effort. He was busy."

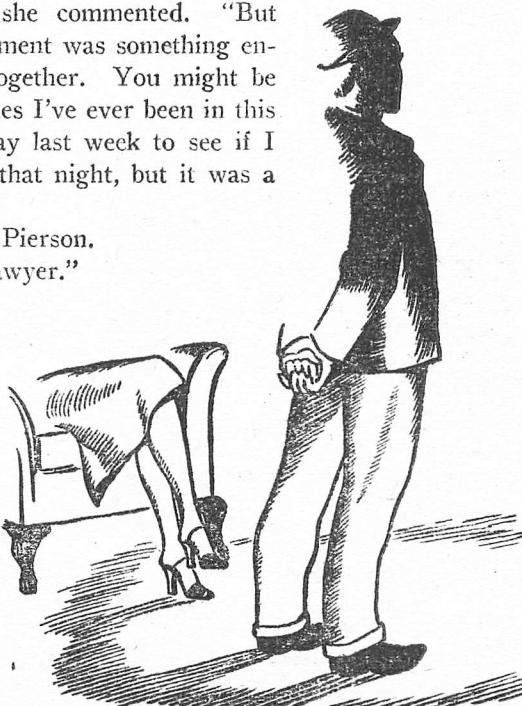
"Busy at what?" snapped Pierson.

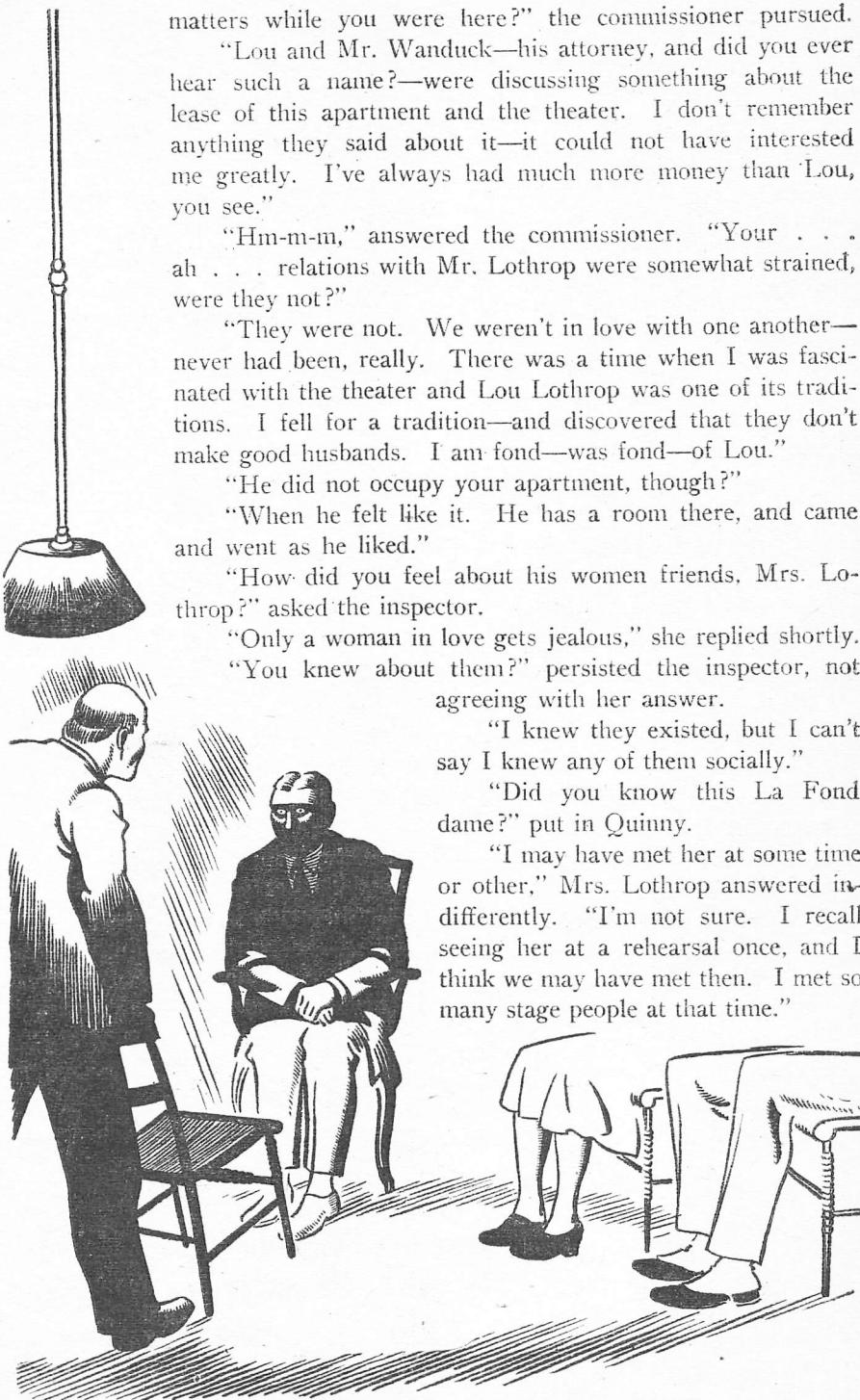
"Having lunch with his lawyer."

"Lunch?" queried the commissioner, lifting his thin eyebrows. "It was my understanding that Mr. Lothrop kept no servants."

"The maid from the hotel was doing the honors—the lunch was strictly delicatessen. I suppose it was the maid—a disreputable-looking female if I ever saw one."

"Did Mr. Lothrop and his lawyer talk of business





matters while you were here?" the commissioner pursued.

"Lou and Mr. Wanduck—his attorney, and did you ever hear such a name?—were discussing something about the lease of this apartment and the theater. I don't remember anything they said about it—it could not have interested me greatly. I've always had much more money than Lou, you see."

"Hm-m-m," answered the commissioner. "Your . . . ah . . . relations with Mr. Lothrop were somewhat strained, were they not?"

"They were not. We weren't in love with one another—never had been, really. There was a time when I was fascinated with the theater and Lou Lothrop was one of its traditions. I fell for a tradition—and discovered that they don't make good husbands. I am fond—was fond—of Lou."

"He did not occupy your apartment, though?"

"When he felt like it. He has a room there, and came and went as he liked."

"How did you feel about his women friends, Mrs. Lothrop?" asked the inspector.

"Only a woman in love gets jealous," she replied shortly.

"You knew about them?" persisted the inspector, not agreeing with her answer.

"I knew they existed, but I can't say I knew any of them socially."

"Did you know this La Fond dame?" put in Quinny.

"I may have met her at some time or other," Mrs. Lothrop answered indifferently. "I'm not sure. I recall seeing her at a rehearsal once, and I think we may have met then. I met so many stage people at that time."

"Mr. Lothrop had been attentive to her lately?" quizzed the commissioner, coming to life again.

"I shouldn't think so. He liked 'em young and impressionable." She stared coolly at the commissioner. "It is my information that they had their little adventure years ago. Things that happened then have never annoyed me."

"But things since then have?" Pierson asked.

She considered a moment or two before replying.

"Not his affairs with women—if he had any."

"What has annoyed you, then?" persisted Pierson.

"It's annoying to be stuck with a husband who isn't in the least interested in what you do, never wants to go to the same places or with the same people you do." She smiled grimly. "Technically, I've been a widow for a long time. And sometimes I've been so furious at him I could have shot him myself."

"How did you know he was shot?" asked Murton quickly. "I'm sure I haven't mentioned that."

"I didn't. That was just an expression."

"I suppose—through your father—you are familiar with the use of firearms?" asked the commissioner.

"Oh, yes—I can shoot," she answered, curling her lip. "I suppose I might just as well resign myself to being a suspect. It's inevitable."

"I have no desire to offend you, Mrs. Lothrop, but I have a duty to perform," explained the commissioner. "We haven't sufficient evidence to suspect anyone as yet, so it is necessary for us to consider all possibilities. Do you know of anyone who might have desired Mr. Lothrop's death—or that of Miss la Fond?"

"Lou made plenty of enemies in his lifetime. About the woman, I don't know."

"Can you name some of these enemies?" asked the commissioner.

"No. He had his own set of acquaintances, entirely separate from mine."

"Could you give an account of your movements last night?" Commissioner Murton shifted in his regal chair to a more comfortable position.

Phyllis Lothrop frowned and flushed a little. "I went to the theater with a friend, stopped in at the Flamingo for a little while, had a few drinks, and went home."

"What time did you get home?" asked Pierson.

"About one o'clock, I think. You can ask the doorman at the apartment."

"Who brought you home?" This from Murton.

"This is nineteen forty," she retorted. "I came home under my own steam—and well able to."

"I see." Murton rubbed the side of his nose. "Taxi or private car?"

"Taxi."

"Did you stay in or go out again?"

She had not gone out again, she said.

Murton got up and strolled about the room, his hands clasped behind him and his forehead wrinkled in thought. He felt—and would have been supported by Pierson and Quinny—that although Mrs. Lothrop answered all questions, her replies seemed guarded. She volunteered nothing. Quinny was getting a little bored with the whole proceeding. Asking questions was all very well, but they didn't know the right ones to ask. At least so far as David Earle and Mrs. Lothrop were concerned.

The commissioner suddenly halted and turned to Mrs. Lothrop. "You are acquainted with Julian Davess, of course?" She nodded affirmatively. "Did you see Julian Davess last night?"

Mrs. Lothrop lighted a cigarette deliberately, extinguished the match, and dropped it on a plate.

"Yes," she replied calmly.

"Where—and at what time?" demanded Murton.

"At the Flamingo, after the theater." She inhaled and exhaled a mouthful of smoke. "As a matter of fact, he sat at my table for a while."

"Who were you with, Mrs. Lothrop?" asked Inspector Pierson. "You said you were at the theater with a friend—who was it?"

"Ranny Boyd." Quinny recognized the name of a radio announcer employed by one of the larger outfits.

"Anyone else in your party at the Flamingo—other than Julian Davess?" Murton sat down again, leaning forward in his chair.

"No. Mr. Davess was not in my party, as you call it. He sat down for a few minutes—had a drink. He wasn't there more than ten minutes, I think."

"Can you say exactly what time he left?" asked Pierson.

"I didn't notice. Mr. Boyd and I arrived at the Flamingo a little after eleven—right after the play. Mr. Davess joined us a few minutes after we sat down. It's a guess, of course, but I should say he left about half-past eleven."

"I see." Murton pursed his lips again and glanced at the woman tentatively. Maybe, thought Quinny, he wants to kiss her. The commissioner changed his expression and smiled knowingly. "Julian Davess—He is rather an intimate friend of yours?"

"What do you mean, intimate?" demanded Mrs. Lothrop.

Quinny eyed her brazenly and noted a faint flush under the make-up—or rather, at the edges of it. The commissioner waved his hand deprecatingly.

"Well—close friend, perhaps," he amplified.

"Just someone I know," snapped Mrs. Lothrop. "And I don't mind telling you, Mr. Commissioner, that I resent your insinuation."

Murton sneered. "I can't very well help that," he replied. "It is a fact, isn't it, that your relations with Julian Davess are a great deal closer than can be described as 'just someone' you know? It is a fact, isn't it, that you have

seen quite a great deal of Mr. Davess from time to time? More, I believe, than you care to admit."

Mrs. Lothrop sprang from her chair as if she'd suddenly encountered a stray pin.

"It is a fact," she exclaimed throatily, "that you are a jackass. If the discovery of my husband's murderer depends on you, I can very well see that it is going to remain a mystery for all time!"

"Mrs. Lothrop!" shouted the commissioner, his face growing stern—and red. "I must insist—"

"Insist and be damned to you," the woman interrupted. "I'm insisting that you are a prize nitwit, a silly, dressed-up boob trying to be a detective. That doesn't give you any license to be insulting, though, and I'm not taking it. Not from you. I'm going home, and the hell with you!"

She picked up her bag and disappeared through the door to the library before the commissioner could think of having her stopped. He glanced at Inspector Pierson.

"I guess we were through with her, anyway," he said. "But I think I stumbled on something—that Davess business. I'm going to look very closely into that angle."

Quinny chuckled. "Don't let that baby catch you peeking, commissioner," he counseled.

VIII.

EFFORTS to locate Julian Davess being unsuccessful at the moment, Quinny decided to go down and see how his prospective bride was faring.

Joan was sitting by one of the front windows, staring out between the forlorn lace curtains. It required none of Quinny's detective talent to tell that she had been crying.

He took the envelope from his pocket and shook out five ten-dollar notes. "Looky!"

"The newspaper money?" she asked, a little interested.

"Yes, ma'am—*Observer* dough." He got up, crossed to where Joan was sitting, and dropped two of the bills in her lap. "Engagement present, Jones. All yours, darling. Why don't you run out and get a new dress, and a hat, and some shoes—and stuff? I want to do some thinking about this murder and I can do it better if I'm alone. When you get back we'll talk about it. How's?"

Joan got up, a smile chasing about her mouth. She threw her arms about Quinny's neck (disarranging his derby thereby) and buried her face in his shoulder.

"You damn fool!" she exclaimed softly. "But I love you!"

Quinny led Joan to the door and shoved her out. Then he returned to the bed and stretched out on it, got his feet crossed comfortably, and composed himself to review what he knew of the affair upstairs. He didn't get far. Someone rapped loudly on the door.

"Come in!" he called, cocking his eyes around to see who it would turn out to be.

The door opened quickly and Phyllis Lothrop entered. She stopped just inside the door, closing it behind her, and surveyed Quinny.

"You look comfortable," she observed.

"Yeah, and I was till you started beating on the woodwork." He grinned affably. "Do I stay as is—or move over?"

"As is."

"You don't go for anything less than police commissioners, eh?" twitted Quinny.

Mrs. Lothrop glared. "That's why I'm here. I understand that you are a private detective?"

"Yeah—who told you?"

Mrs. Lothrop went on. "Here's what I want. I want someone to find out who killed Lou—and that woman—and I want to know who it was before the police find out. If they ever do, which I doubt."

"That's right up my alley," replied Quinny. "I've got a little grudge of my own that could do with some oiling. I can crack this case, but it will take a few crackers. *You* know."

"Certainly. I'll give you five hundred dollars, if you can get the truth for me before the police get it."

"Do I get a—you know—retainer?"

"Yes, of course. Come over to my apartment this evening—about eight-thirty—and I'll give you a hundred. But don't let that keep you from starting to work. You'll get it."

"No doubt," returned Quinny. "I'm working on it right now. Got anything to tell me that might help?"

"I don't think so, but there are some things I'll tell you tonight. I don't think they are important, and, anyhow, that little lizard has me too upset to talk intelligently about anything right now. I'll think about it, and something may occur to me between now and tonight." She got up and walked toward the door, looking at Quinny with a curious expression. "Tell me, Mr. Hite, do you always wear that hat? Do you sleep in it?"

"No," answered Quinny, removing the derby and gazing at it fondly. "That would be bad for the hat."

"See you at eight-thirty."

She paused for another glance as she reached the door. Quinny waved the derby and recrossed his legs as a gesture of dismissal. "Where do you live, by the way?"

"Thirty-seventh and Park—the Park Towers."

"O. K.—eight-thirty."

She went out, shutting the door noisily behind her, and Quinny recomposed himself to think.

He felt quite sure that two guns had been used. If so, and on the tentative theory he had put together upstairs, the killer or killers could have entered

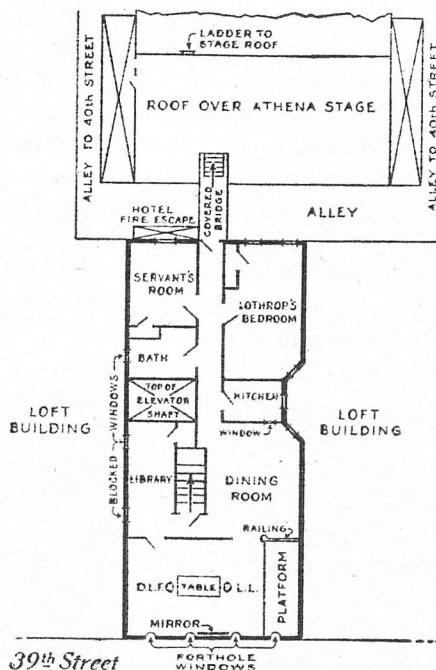
the apartment by way of the theater and reached the drawing room without either of the victims being aware of the intrusion. If there had been two assassins, the crime was simple enough—one of them would have gone to the library door and the other could easily have knocked off Lothrop from the dining room. Just one murderer equipped with a revolver and a rifle didn't seem at all reasonable, considering that the victims seemingly had been shot at the same split second.

To get into the theater before proceeding to the apartment, it would be necessary to pass Al, the night stage doorman. Al most likely would notice anyone coming into the theater at that time of night with a rifle. Of course, the murderer (or murderers) could have sat among the audience, concealing themselves after the show was over and crossing the footlights when the house had emptied, thus gaining the dressing-room stairway. In that event, Al would not have seen them. But there was a drawback to this: one couldn't sit in an orchestra seat during a burlesque show with a rifle between his knees. Not very well. The actors would be completely unnerved.

He'd see Al about this. Preferably before the police got to him. Looked as if he'd have to get up. He managed it, and in a top bureau drawer found some hotel stationery which had an old engraving of the Du Nord at the top, the hotel apparently sticking up in the center of a prairie.

DEAR JONES & SWEETHEART:

I got to go out on the case and I'll be back about six and blow us to dinner and maybe you'll wear the new front and stuff and best wishes from yours any day now. And XXXXXXXX QUINNY.



"Guess that'll keep Jones from being unhappy till I get back," he murmured, gave the derby a tug, and went to the elevator.

While he was waiting, Max Allron came out of a room and joined him. Quinny didn't know much about Allron. He had been living at the Du Nord before Quinny moved in. Professional master of ceremonies, or something like that, when employed at all, and the detective didn't think that was often. Suave and well dressed, even fastidiously so. How he managed it, Quinny had little idea, but he suspected him of slaving over a hot iron and a reversed bureau drawer when less clothes-minded men were sleeping.

"Nice place we're living in," observed the newcomer, with a grin.

"Where were *you* between two and four this morning?"

Max glanced up and down the otherwise deserted hall, then seized the lapel of Quinny's coat with a long and slender hand, immaculately manicured.

"Sh-h-h—" he whispered. "Take me for a spot of beer and I'll tell all."

"No beer," said Quinny firmly. A guy could go broke in no time buying beer for these out-of-work Times Square gents. "I'm no sucker."

"You wrong me, officer. Just to show you, I'll match you for the beer and tell all or nothing."

Quinny snorted impolitely. "No chance—I've seen you doing coin tricks in the lobby." He peered through the iron grillework of the elevator shaft. "Where the hell is that guy?"

"We'll go Dutch, then," said Max resignedly. "I want to know about the murder upstairs."

"So do I," replied the detective. "But I don't see where gassing and guzzling with you is going to get me anywhere."

"You are working on the case?" Allron pursed his lips as though surprised and stared fixedly at Quinny. Attention from the person you're speaking to is a fine thing, but Quinny thought Allron rather overdid it. His gaze never wavered. A clanking sound indicated that the elevator was rising. As it appeared in the shaft he decided to speak: "Good. I'm really glad you're getting a break, Hite. You know, my room has a window on the air shaft, just under Lothrop's kitchen."

"Yeah? Did you know Lothrop?"

"I directed a couple of shows for him—years back," replied Allron airily.

"Ever visit his apartment—up there?"

"Certainly not—he's never asked me." Allron laughed shortly as the elevator door slid open. "What am I, a suspect?"

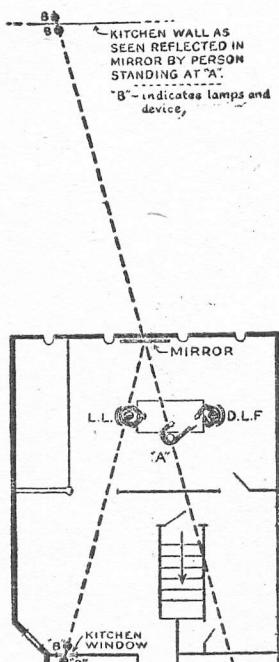
"I didn't say so," demurred Quinny as he politely led the way into the elevator. "I was just wondering how you knew your room was under his kitchen."

"Oh, that!" Allron chuckled. "There's nothing wrong with my nose."

They reached the main floor and walked out together. Quinny decided to take a flyer on a dime's worth of beer apiece, and charge it off to profit and loss if he got nothing further from his guest.

"I heard the shots which killed Lothrop and La Fond," Max was saying, getting his foot comfortably settled on the rail and his long fingers nicely encircled about a beer glass.

"How many shots did you hear?"



"Two—I think. If there were two they were fired so close together as to sound like one. Yet I think there were two."

Quinny nodded. "I get you. Two shots fired at the same time don't sound like one shot, exactly. What else did you hear?"

"A phonograph. The damned thing played all night—or until I went to sleep, anyway." Allron finished off his beer and tapped the glass on the bar tentatively.

"How'd you know it was a phonograph and not a radio?"

"Radios don't play the same number over and over again."

"Did you ever know a guy named Carlo Ralph?" Quinny wanted to know.

Allron glanced away and rubbed the side of his nose with a finger. "Certainly. He was in 'The Girl from Dieppe' when I met him. You may have heard of the show. He was also a member of the same chapter of my lodge. Carlo Ralph was killed in the war in nineteen seventeen or eighteen."

"No foolin'!" exclaimed Quinny.

IX.

"GOOTNESS!" exclaimed Mrs. Neuman, horrified as only one of German blood can be at the mention of police. "Mr. Wassermann—he didn't do something yet? Such a nice man, too. For a long time he lives with me."

Quinny thought she didn't mean that last crack literally.

"How long?" he asked.

Mrs. Neuman didn't know. The Athena's night watchman was living in the house when she took it over some ten years ago.

"Ten years more and he'll be a permanent," observed Quinny. "How do I get to him?"

The landlady invited him into a spotless hall and showed him the stairs to the basement—rear. She explained that she wouldn't go with him, in view of Mr. Wassermann's temper. Quinny stumbled down the dark stairs and brought up in an unlighted hall at the bottom. However, there did seem to be a door faintly visible, and he whacked it vigorously.

"Wassermann?" demanded Quinny. "Open up."

A creaking like bed springs sounded faintly, a *pad-pad* of upholstered feet, and the door opened a few inches to reveal a gaunt, shriveled face.

"What do you want?" demanded the tenant of the rear basement.

"I want to see you about a murder. Open up."

The door swung open and closed again as Quinny entered. His unenthusiastic host crossed the room and sat down on the huge brass bed. A Morris chair received the detective.

Quinny eyed Al Wassermann for a moment or two without speaking. Sometimes this worked out to be a good plan. Then:

"You know Lou Lothrop was knocked off last night?"

Al lifted his eyes to meet Quinny's and wavered.

"No," he replied. "You mean—somebody killed him?"

"And Deseray la Fond."

"Last night?" asked Al, taking a rather large meerschaum pipe from a table by the bed. A pair of thick-lensed glasses fell to the floor; the doorman rescued them and restored them to the table. Then he struck a match and applied it to the pipe bowl. Quinny was mildly interested as Al blew out a mouthful of smoke. It must have had the tobacco in it all night, he decided. Anybody that can smoke what's left in a pipe like that—well, the guy's got guts, that's all.

"Last night," affirmed Quinny. "While you were on the job at the Athena. Now, looky, Al, you can tell me who went up to Lothrop's apartment through the theater."

"Yes," assented Al. "I can tell you that. Julian Davess went up first—you know about the party, don't you?"

The detective nodded.

"I know about that. What time did Davess go up?"

"Twelve o'clock. I was just going to ring my clocks."

"Next?"

"A woman."

"Who was she?"

"I don't know. She had on a fancy costume like they used to wear in shows—maybe they do yet: I don't see that kind of show any more." The doorman rubbed a wrinkled hand over his eyes.

"Did you know this La Fond woman?"

"Well, I've heard of her."

"Ever see her in a show?" pursued Quinny.

"Years ago," admitted Al.

"That's all you know about her—you have heard of her and, a long time ago, you've seen her in shows. This dame was tops then and you probably saw a lot of pictures of her. She passes you in the stage entrance and you don't know who she is?"

"No, I didn't. It must have been twenty-five or thirty years ago when I saw her on the stage. I don't even know if this is the woman anyhow. I just said a woman came in and said she was going up to Lothrop's party." Al relit his pipe.

"How many other women were there?"

"That was the only one."

"Then it must have been La Fond. All right—we'll skip it." Quinny pushed his hat back and leaned forward—not an easy position in a Morris chair, either. "Next guest?"

"Earle—David Earle, the producer. He came in right after the woman."

"Then who?" Quinny's mind was on the two guests at the party for whom he had no names.

"No one. That's all that came."

The doorman was positive on this point, and refused to be shaken.

"O. K., then. Davess, La Fond, and Earle went up through the theater to Lothrop's party. Now, what did you have to do with the party?"

"Nothing much." Al raised his eyes from an inspection of the frayed rug and stared vacantly at his questioner. "I went up right after the burlesque broke and fixed the lobster for Mr. Lothrop. I was up earlier and put some ice in the icebox. That's all."

"Who was there the first time you went up—to do the business with the ice?"

"Mr. Lothrop."

"Who else?"

The doorman asserted there had been no one else then.

"The second time you went up—to fix the lobster," Quinny continued. "Who was there then?"

"Mr. Lothrop."

"Who else this time? You don't expect me to believe he was sitting around by himself all this time?"

"I don't care what you believe." Al showed a belligerent look in his eyes. "There was someone else, though—a woman. A girl. Young and pretty."

"Yeah!" A thrill shot through Quinny. "Who?"

"I don't know. I know I never saw this one before. She was about twenty, I guess. She had on a light-blue dress and a thing I suppose you would call a hat. Blond hair—fluffy. Pretty hands, too—long and slim. But I didn't get a good look at her—just a peek through the pantry window."

"You did all right, Al," replied Quinny. "Did this broiler stay for the party?"

"I don't know. I went downstairs to the theater when I got through with the lobster. Left it on the gas stove."

"Hm-m-m." Quinny rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Now, who came out from the party?"

"Nobody but Earle."

"How about Davess?"

"If he came through the theater I didn't see him."

"How could he get out through the theater without your seeing him?" asked Quinny.

"He could have got out while I was punching time clocks. You see, the stage door doesn't lock from the inside, except with a hook. I don't remember whether it was hooked or not. Sometimes I forget to hook it."

Quinny pulled his derby down over his eyes and thought hard for a few minutes about Al's replies. Then he got up and wandered absently around the big room, finally finding a seat more to his liking on a big packing trunk that was doing duty as a table.

"What else you got to tell me, Al?" he asked abruptly.

Al, who had been watching him, dropped his gaze to the rug. He glanced up and started to speak, then again eyed the rug. "Nothing," he said.

"Horses!" exclaimed Quinny. "I can see it in your eyes. Come on, spill it."

"I'm not sure about it," wavered the doorman.

"You ain't under oath," Quinny reminded. "Come on, let's have it."

"Well, I think Mr. Earle came back to the party—later," replied the doorman slowly.

X.

THE late-afternoon sun was dazzling to Quinny's eyes as he emerged from Mrs. Neuman's house, but he turned his back on it and trudged along eastward to Eighth Avenue. His thoughts remained on the scene he had just quitted and Al's statements. Who was the pretty blonde that Lothrop had been amusing himself with? Had she left when the others arrived?

He considered Davess. The police hadn't been able to locate Davess while Quinny had been in the apartment, and now he wondered if they'd had any more success. Davess might be home by this time, he thought, and entered a cigar store to call him.

In the booth he closed the door and brought up a small supply of change from his trousers pocket. He selected an iron washer from the collection and dropped it into the slot. Quinny could hear the phone at the other end ringing—or the rhythmic buzz that indicated it was—but there was no answer. After waiting a good while, he hung up and reached for his ersatz coin. It wasn't returned, and, annoyed at the perfidy of the telephone company, he rapped the side of the coin box smartly to remind it of its dereliction. The door to the coin box swung open.

"Pennies from heaven!" exclaimed Quinny.

He was a little disappointed at the take, and somewhat outraged to find that others had the same idea about washers.

"The bums!" he murmured bitterly, restoring the box to its proper place and \$1.85, together with fourteen washers, to his trousers pocket.

As he reached the sidewalk he saw Max Allron on the other side of the street, stepping smartly along. Quinny watched him until he disappeared toward Ninth Avenue, then resumed his journey eastward.

Quinny, seizing a favorable moment, crossed Eighth Avenue and walked slowly down to Thirty-seventh Street, where he entered a Western Union office. Here he composed a telegram, addressed to Julian Davess.

IMPORTANT CALL PHYLISS NINE THIRTY TONIGHT LOVE LOVE LOVE

Quinny always used the allotment of ten words.

He hoped he would get in his oar with Davess before the commissioner caught up with him.

XI.

QUINNY encountered Inspector Pierson at the entrance when he reached the Du Nord. Alone. Catching sight of his ex-associate, Pierson stopped and eyed him suspiciously.

"Where've you been?" he demanded.

"West Indian cruise. How've you been?" retorted Quinny. "Any luck?"

The inspector shrugged. "Report from ballistics showed Lothrop had been killed with a Mauser rifle bullet, while La Fond had died from a .32-caliber revolver bullet—probably Smith & Wesson."

"Just like I figured," gloated Quinny. "What caliber was it?"

"What's the difference—7.66 millimeters, I think. All we got to do is find somebody who didn't like Lothrop who had a Mauser rifle." Pierson grinned.

"It has to be one kind of a Mauser," observed Quinny. "There's just as many different kinds of Mausers as there are Winchesters."

Inspector Pierson frowned in thought. "Seems to me the Spaniards used a Mauser in the Spanish-American War."

"Dave Earle was in that war," responded Quinny.

"Yeah, I know. But how the hell is a man going to tote a five-foot rifle through Thirty-ninth or Fortieth Street and nobody see him?"

"He could have brought it into the hotel and hid it somewhere beforehand," suggested Quinny.

"What did he do with it after the shooting?" demanded Pierson. "If he hid it again, he did a good job of it." The inspector shrugged. "I'm going up to look over the La Fond woman's apartment. No sign of Davess yet. Murton's waiting in the apartment upstairs for him, if they find him."

Quinny volunteered to go along to the La Fond apartment with him. The inspector evinced no enthusiasm, but didn't object, and the two men walked away, turning uptown on Eighth Avenue.

The apartment of Désirée la Fond proved to be rather a humble one in an old building not far from Eighth Avenue—a remodeled brownstone. An unkempt female let them in and scurried away.

"I don't think we're going to get much here," observed Pierson dubiously. "I'll frisk this desk and you might give the trunk a going over. That's all I can see to work on."

Presently Quinny found something he wanted to look into—but privately. A rosewood box, nestling at the bottom of the trunk and just about the size and shape a woman would keep old letters in. He pondered the problem of snitching the box without the inspector's knowing it.

Inspiration came to Quinny.

"How about giving the old gal that runs this dump a going over?" he asked. "She'd know who La Fond's been running with, maybe."

"Good idea, Hite. I was going to, anyway," responded Pierson. And then the magic words: "Go get her."

"Right." Quinny smiled happily at a large framed photograph of Désirée la Fond on the wall, glanced quickly at the inspector, snapped up the box from under a costume, and walked, not too leisurely, into the hallway. "Bingo!" This to himself alone.

He went downstairs, pausing at the foot to scribble a note on a piece of paper he found in his pocket.

It read:

DEAR JONES & SWEETHEART: Give this guy a buck and keep this box till I get back pretty soon. QUINNY.

There was an idling taxi on the street before the house, and to its driver the detective intrusted the precious—maybe—box, with instructions to deliver it to Joan at the Du Nord.

Mrs. Flannery, the "Supt." wasn't very hard to find. "This inspector, he's a nasty guy," Quinny explained to her, "and all he wants is answers—no cracks."

Her testimony developed along lines eminently satisfactory to Quinny. She didn't know anything about the woman, hardly. Didn't see her much. No callers—not to amount to anything, and none of them men. One who had been in pretty often lately and stayed quite a long time when she came.

Is there Magic in this Oriental Confection?

was a pretty little blond girl about twenty or so. Phone calls? Some. The telephone was in the hall, and Mrs. Flannery only answered it in the daytime, usually. The guests did most of the answering.

"There was some fellow called her two-three times about a week ago," she went on. "I dunno if he ever got her or not—she wasn't ever in when I answered."

"Leave any name?" asked Pierson incuriously. He was evidently getting a little bored with Mrs. Flannery.

"Yeah," she answered, wrinkling a brow that seemed already beyond any fresh wrinkles. "Once. Said to tell her Ralph called. Gawd, and I forgot to tell her." She seemed mildly appalled.

"Ralph?" ejaculated Quinny sharply. "Did he ever get her on the phone, or come around?"

"I ain't no snoop, mister," asserted Mrs. Flannery. "I don't know."

XII.

JOAN was, as expected, waiting for him, but not in the mood he expected to find her. She had on the new dress—and where is the woman wearing a spang-new dress that can't maintain a snippy humor? Especially with the added excitement of new shoes and hat.

"Great gosh, Jones!" exclaimed Quinny wisely.

"How do I look? Do you like my new dress 'n' everything?" she demanded, swishing about to give him the full works. "If I can't get married, I might as well get dressed up. It'll get the girls' minds off the postponed wedding—I hope."

"You look swell, anyway, Jones," put in Quinny hurriedly before the girl got her mind tracked on the unexecuted nuptials. "Say, beautiful, I got an offer of five hundred crullers from Lothrop's widow to crack this case before the police do. I forgot to tell you."

"Five hundred dollars?" Joan was aghast.

"Yeppo. Let me call the *Observer*, and then we'll hop out for the hamburger à la Fifty-second Street." Quinny stretched his length on the bed, grabbed the telephone, gave his call to the operator, and stared at the spotted ceiling. "Peachy-weechie—we're going to be rich by the time we get through with this murder. It'll put me back on my feet."

"If it'll just get your feet off my bed, I'll be thankful."

Quinny got the hard-working Parker in time to avoid working out a retort. He quickly went over the situation on the Lothrop-La Fond case, then made a proposition.

He restored the telephone to the little rickety table and looked at Joan as he struggled from the bed.

"Five hundred goes," he said to the girl. "That's one grand I can earn by finding out who killed Lou Lothrop and Deseeray la Fond." He looked searchingly around the room. "What did you do with a box—a little

wooden box—a cabby brought up and took a dollar off you for?"

"It's in the top drawer," she answered carelessly.

Quinny got the box out of the drawer and discovered the lock could be picked quite easily. He emptied the contents on the bed. They weren't much. But what there was seemed interesting.

A yellowed photograph of a buxom lass who was indisputably the murdered woman, standing with her hand resting on the shoulder of a man in some sort of army uniform, seated in a heavily ornate chair, holding a slouch hat on his knee. There was no writing on the photograph, only the photographer's signature printed in gold on the lower part of the mount—"Turtle, Bloemfontein."

Besides this there was a worn gold locket, on the back of which had been etched "D. D.—K. W.," a long string of imitation pearls, a plain gold wedding ring, and some other odd bits of jewelry that didn't look as if they would bring much at the pawnbroker's. Also a dented belt buckle which bore the monogram SAR.

But what he had been hoping for was letters. There was only one, a single page of neat and somewhat faded writing, which Quinny read with interest and then aloud to Joan:

DEAR DORA:

At last the war is over and my soldier days, too. Things are pretty bad in Germany now, and I think they will be for a long time. I am trying to get my act together and may be able to get a booking at the Winter Palace in Berlin. If you were with me, everything would be all right, but you are a big star and wouldn't like being in the act again. You were happy enough once just to be my wife and help in the act, but that was before Lou Lothrop got hold of you and spoiled our lives. Mine, anyhow. All these men that died in the war—and this man lives! But he will pay me yet.

Maybe I will see you again when I come back to America after the act is all right again.

You won't write me, I know, but I shall let you know when I return.

Your husband,
CARLO.

THE clock on the façade of Grand Central Terminal indicated eight-fifteen. Not to Quin Hite, however; since he was stepping along southward on Park Avenue and the clock was behind him. Unfamiliar hunting ground to him, this Park Avenue. He turned in at the entrance of an imposing edifice near Thirty-seventh Street. After being formally announced by the girl behind a window marked nicely, "Information," he was told to go up to 1614.

"You are punctual, Mr. Hite," Phyllis Lothrop said.

It had been right on the tip of Quinny's tongue to say, "Hiya, baby," but he remarked instead that he was usually on time.

"I don't suppose you have anything to report yet," commented Mrs. Lothrop, handing a bank note to Quinny. "That's your retainer."

"Thanks," returned Quinny. "Well, let's get down to cases."

"Item One?"

"Item One," repeated Quinny. "What's the hook-up between you and this Julian Davess?"

The woman scowled.

"Tell papa," coaxed the detective. "I don't want to imagine. I get bad ideas when I imagine."

"Julian Davess managed to get himself into a mess," she began. "As you probably know, Mr. Davess is a stockbroker. He held a number of Lou's best securities—"

"So he run short of checkers and hocked the securities," suggested Quinny. "He come to you to see if you could stall the old gent from coming down on him. Check?"

"Check. Lou threatened to have him jailed. I tried to intercede, and Mr. Lothrop told me to mind my own business."

"And Davess asked you to try again?"

The woman nodded.

Quinny pondered for a moment, vaguely wishing for his hat. He could think better with his hat on. "Did he intend to do anything himself?"

"Why he did say he was going to Lou's party and thought that perhaps while Lou's mind was on the old days he might listen to reason."

"And that came out n. g., too?" Quinny lifted one eyebrow quizzically.

"That didn't do any good, either," she assented.

"And so, about two thirty this morning you went to see Lou Lothrop!"

The woman's voice was sharp: "Don't be silly. I haven't seen Lou since Monday."

Quinny didn't believe her.

"Baby, don't kid," he said. "You got a call from Davess sometime around two o'clock this morning, met him somewhere, and after that went to see Lou Lothrop."

Her face flooded with color.

"I did not!" she denied furiously. "I haven't seen or heard from Mr. Davess since I saw him last night at the Flamingo. And as for going to Lou Lothrop's apartment—"

"I said, 'Don't kid,'" interrupted the detective. "If you haven't seen or heard from Julian Davess since you saw him at the night club, how did you know Lou turned him down when he came to the party?"

XIII.

PHYLLIS LOTHROP stared at Quinny, appalled. He grinned affably.

"But—if that gets out it will look as if I—"

"It'll get out—depend on that," interrupted Quinny grimly. "You couldn't go from here to the Du Nord at that time of day, or any other, without somebody seeing you and remembering it. You're too good-looking, for one thing. You are a woman a guy looks at." He hesitated a moment.

"I'd remember you quite a while myself."

"Thanks," replied Mrs. Lothrop. "Well, here it is, then—"

She had gone to Lothrop's apartment shortly after two to offer to make Davess' defalcation good to the tune of twenty grand. But as she entered she saw two people, a man and a woman whom she didn't know, with Lou Lothrop and La Fond and she had retreated unseen. She hadn't been able to get a good look at their faces, but the woman wore a soubrette costume and wasn't young.

"The hell with her clothes!" exclaimed Quinny excitedly. "What was her face like?"

Mrs. Lothrop waved a hand helplessly. "I couldn't say. She was sitting with her back to me, and I think she had blond hair."

There was the sound of a distant telephone ringing, which brought some of his recent activities to Quinny's mind.

"That's probably Davess calling you. Ask him to come up."

"What makes you think that?"

"I wired him to call you. I want to see him before the cops put him where I can't talk to him. I thought he'd most likely call you if I sent him a wire—signed 'Phyllis'."

The butler entered with the information that Mrs. Lothrop was wanted on the telephone. She excused herself, leaving the detective to ponder over the new developments. He gazed at a large photograph on the piano—and you'd only know it was a piano because it had a keyboard—depicting his hostess in hunting attire with a rifle in her hands and a dead beast underfoot that Quinny mistook for a tiger. It was a jaguar, but Quinny didn't know about jaguars. She could shoot, all right. No dame goes around knocking off tigers unless she knows what to do with a gun. At that, though, maybe somebody else had conked the animal for her. Anyway—those missing guests, damn it, he just had to find out who they were.

Where was this mug, Davess, all the time after he had phoned Phyllis last night? And what was the idea of hiding out all day? What—And at this point Mrs. Lothrop returned.

"That was Julian," she said. "We're to meet him at a bar called the Shamrock over on Third Avenue. He doesn't want to come here—thinks somebody might notice."

THAT Julian Davess was a frightened man was easily apparent as he hurriedly entered the Shamrock Grill.

"Hello," he greeted them, with an effort at a casual tone. He glanced curiously, warily, at Quinny.

"Hello, Julian," replied Mrs. Lothrop, and with a slight gesture of her hand: "This is Mr. Hite. Sit down." Davess dropped onto the bench by her side. She continued: "Mr. Hite is a private detective I have employed to protect my interests."

"I see." Davess patted his forehead with an immaculate handkerchief.

"I'm in a very bad spot. I realized that as soon as I heard of the . . . the death of Mr. Lothrop, and Désirée. Lothrop was alive when I left the party —very much so. I left—"

"What time?" demanded Quinny.

"I left the party a few minutes after one o'clock this morning—the night clerk at the Du Nord should verify this. He took me down in the elevator—"

"Then you called up Mrs. Lothrop"—Davess shot a quick glance at the woman, but she was watching Quinny and didn't catch it—"and she came to the party. And that reminds me." Quinny paused and looked at Mrs. Lothrop. "When we left off at the apartment, you had just got to the party and was peeking from the library. What did you do after that?"

"Why—" She seemed a little startled at the question. "I came on home."

"You gave up the idea of seeing Mr. Lothrop?" pursued Quinny.

"I decided to see him this morning," the woman answered.

"Why didn't you?"

Mrs. Lothrop frowned and traced a design on the wet table top.

"Well, I phoned Lou two or three times, but there wasn't an answer—naturally—so I thought he wasn't there."

Quinny nodded and turned to Davess. "Where'd you go?" he asked bluntly.

"Home."

Quinny didn't feel satisfied with these replies. "So everybody went home," he mused. "It was important as hell for one of you to talk to Lou Lothrop. So you each go to bat, take one strike, and go home." He clamped his iron hat on firmly and got up. "Look here, you better do some rehearsing on this piece before you do your performance for the cops. It's a little rough in spots. And do it somewhere else than here. I got an idea I want to work on." He grinned lightly at Mrs. Lothrop. "I'll be seeing *you* later."

XIV.

USING the unique Hite technique, Quinny entered an apartment on Riverside Drive at a little before ten o'clock. It wasn't too much of an apartment—two rooms with a kitchenette and bath on one side of a connecting hallway.

One question that Quinny had in the back of his mind was solved by a photograph of Davess in a British army uniform. In the same frame was another photograph of the tenor in still another army uniform—a much older picture and a much younger Davess standing on some artificial grass, a rifle in his hand, bandoliers of cartridges crossed over his shoulders and a slouch hat pulled down over his forehead. The photograph bore the printed signature, "Longket—Ladysmith." The rifle resembled the old Mauser.

"Looks like him and this Ralph guy was in the same war some place," he murmured.

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The cops were, sooner or later, going to take Davess and shake him loose from everything Quinny had painstakingly learned. Quin Hite didn't want this to happen.

He got up to go into the bedroom to telephone Phyllis, when he heard the elevator stop. The sound jiggled his brain cells and in two seconds he had a new plan. He crossed the living room swiftly to the entrance door and switched out the lights.

If this is Davess, he thought, listening to the sound of footsteps in the hall, I'll put the slug on him when he comes in. I'll put it on him good—I don't like him much, anyway. Mark him up so he'll have something to show. Then he can make a big, big squawk—"slugged by mysterious intruder in his apartment" when he got home. The dicks will think it was the same guy that knocked off the dame and Lothrop. And won't I laugh—

A key grated in the lock, the door swung in. Quinny swung out, bringing a punch from an arm's length behind him. It landed flush on the chin with a dull *bop*. The recipient went down on his knees, staying there long enough to take a hard right on the eye, then stretched his length on the rug.

I was too rough, regretted Quinny, he ain't marked half enough. Well, I'll have to hang around till he wakes up and give him a couple more easy ones.

He turned on the lights to see just what the visible effects were—and for the first time in his life almost passed out from sheer emotion.

"My gosh!" he exclaimed. "I've slugged Inspector Pierson!"

With that, and no more than that, he clamped the iron hat firmly on his head and lammed for the staircase. He really didn't breathe easily until he got back to Times Square and established an alibi with his favorite bartender on Forty-fourth Street.

With the aid of a dish of rye and soda he reviewed the fiasco and decided that, while it was not as good as his original plan, it hadn't hurt anything.

XV.

DAVID EARLE was sitting at his desk, supporting his chin in his hands and staring vacantly at a large mounted moose head on the wall. The air held the odor of tobacco smoke, although Earle was not smoking. He turned his head as the door swung open and looked at Quinny calmly.

"You're one of the detectives that was at Lou Lothrop's apartment this afternoon," he said. "Well, what do you want?"

Quinny frowned and pushed back his hat. "Look here, Mr. Earle," he began, "this afternoon when the commish was giving you the business, you forgot to tell him you went back to the party somewhere around three o'clock."

"Yes, that's true," admitted Earle slowly. "But I didn't go up to Lothrop's apartment."

The detective had nothing with which to combat this assertion.

"I've been sitting here thinking about those old days. It's all so futile, Hite.

Lou worked as hard or harder than any of us, built himself up to what he wanted to be. Then what? He's outdistanced by the newcomers and finishes up by being shot through the head at his own table."

Quinny's eyebrows lifted. "How long have you been sitting up here?" he asked quickly.

"Oh, since about nine o'clock, I guess," replied Earle. He looked at his watch. "Good Lord, I didn't realize it was that late!"

"You got here too early for the morning papers, then?"

"Of course. The morning papers don't appear until ten-thirty or eleven," said Earle. "What about it?"

"Nothing much," Quinny answered. "Only I was just wondering how you knew Lothrop was shot through the head at his own table. It wasn't mentioned in the afternoon sheets—or when you were at the apartment."

XVI.

QUIN HITE came back to the hotel and found Wolfe, the night clerk, behind the desk, busy with his nightly bookkeeping. To Quinny's question, Wolfe replied, positively and emphatically, that no one had gone to the Lothrop apartment after two o'clock. He had been in the lobby almost constantly from then on and, pointing to Max Allron, sitting in the little alcove across from the desk, said he'd been hanging around in the lobby until daylight. Allron joined them, with a smile.

Quinny gave the old derby a shove and looked perplexed.

"Damn it," he snorted. "A man and woman went up to that apartment last night around two o'clock. The night man at the Athena says they didn't go through the theater and you say they didn't go through the hotel. Will you tell me how the hell they got up there?"

"Not too difficult," Max said. "There are several ways of getting into that apartment."

"Name one or two—besides the elevator, the stairway, and the theater," demanded the detective. "Gosh, Lothrop might just as well have had his party on the sidewalk."

Allron displayed white teeth in another smile. "Well, it might be possible to go up the fire escape in the theater alley and climb in a back window, if one were open. If not, by way of the roof to the front windows. The roof slants down at the front, you know, and you could slide down the incline to the cornice. That's two possible ways of entering the apartment. Or—"

But Quinny had moved off down the hall to the maid's room.

Reaching the door, he turned the knob softly and peeked in, not wishing to awaken the pitiful creature if she were asleep. There wasn't anyone there. Wondering where she could have gone, Quinny entered the room and decided that it was even worse than his.

He went to the narrow window which looked out onto the alley at the side of the Athena and stood there staring moodily into the dark shadows,

made all the darker by street lights filtering through the long fire escape which led up the side of the theater.

I'd like to have another look at that apartment, he thought, but the cops have it all sealed up by now, and I'm not chump enough to go breaking seals.

Inspiration struck him smack on the headpin. The fire escape! Max Allron's idea.

A few minutes later, he silently entered the apartment's kitchen for a squint through the opening into the dining room.

He reached the opening and, leaning over, peered through. He checked an exclamation. There was someone in the distant front room! And it was no cop. A single candle burned in the center of the table, giving little light, but enough for Quinny to see a figure seated at the table in the same chair that had been the last conscious resting place of Louis Lothrop.

He stared through the orifice, trying vainly to see who it was. A woman—he could discern that much—and in costume. Her head was thrown back; a long, slender forearm rested on the table in front of her, and slender fingers grasped a wineglass. But more than that Quinny could not see. She didn't move. She could be dead, he thought.

As he gazed, a phonograph suddenly began playing, softly, with a rasping quality that indicated either an old record or the need of a new needle.

I only live, my love, when you're
Alone with me.

He crept silently out of the kitchen back into the hallway, and on to the dining-room entrance. Here he paused. This was a hazard. The woman could not see him if he kept close to the wall, but someone else who might be moving about in the front room could.

He came through the door into the dining room and, quickly flattening himself against the wall, sidled along until he reached the door to the short hall connecting this room with the library.

Quinny reached the door connecting the library with the front room and stuck his head beyond the opening cautiously. He didn't see anything helpful. But he felt a lot. A terrific crashing sensation on the point of his chin, and then the floor striking him a goodly whack from the rear.

He hadn't been on the floor very long when he got his eyes open again. The phonograph was still going, insisting on being alone with someone.

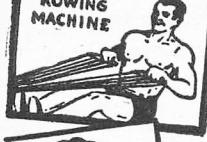
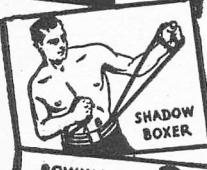
It was alone with Quinny. A quick and belligerent dash through the apartment proved that.

As there wasn't likely to be any interruption now, he turned on all the lights he needed.

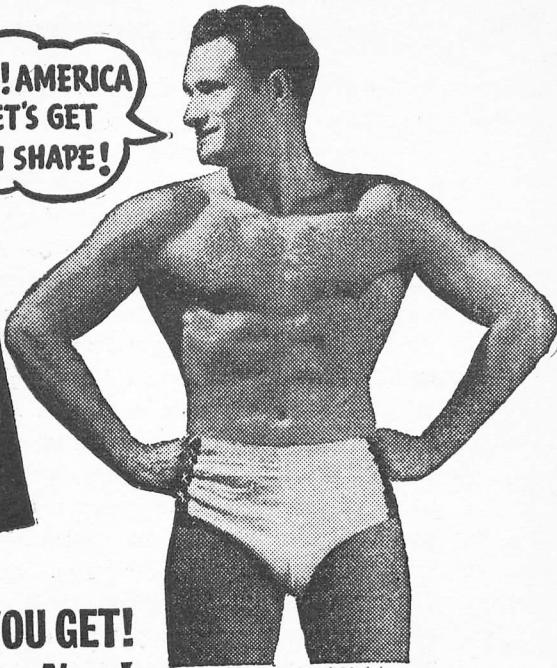
It seems that a woman wearing sequins can't sit down without shedding some of them. He found several and put them in an old envelope. Taking the candle in lieu of a flashlight, he got down and explored the area around the chair, and here he found something. Commonplace enough, but interesting under the circumstances—a hotel key, number 510.

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A brief look into Lothrop's bedroom decided him that it had not been disturbed, and he went across to the servant's room. He wanted another look at that contraption the inspector had unearthed, if the fingerprinters hadn't taken it away. They hadn't.

After some concentration Quinny picked the thing up and carried it into the kitchen. Here he laid it on the cabinet in front of the window into the dining room and switched on the little lights mounted on the two hoops at each end of the board. Then, leaning over, he got the two lights in line with the chair in the drawing room which Lothrop had been sitting in at the time of his death. There was a queer-looking screw in the board that he discovered fitted the screw hole exactly, holding the board fast to the top of the cabinet. He squinted along the top again, and as nearly as he could tell, the two lights were in direct line with the head of any person sitting in the chair.

But you can't shoot a guy with electric lights, he reflected. Staring in puzzlement at the thing, he noticed there was a screw-eye in the board identical with the one in the table top. Suddenly he seemed to get a fresh idea. He walked out of the kitchen, switched on all the lights in the dining room, and walked along its west wall, eying the picture molding. He found two more of the screw-eyes, one near the door to the back hall and another near the entrance into the short hall leading to the library. In this hall he found two more—the last one just over the side of the door between the library and the drawing room.

Quinny stopped in this latter doorway and looked into the drawing room—and got a thrill. In the mirror mounted on the front wall between the portholelike windows, he could see reflected the kitchen window and the two little lights on the device he had set there. The two lights were apparently aimed directly at him! He moved experimentally and found that only on a line from the position in the doorway to the side of the table did the lights remain aimed at him, and, incidentally, at the spot where Lothrop's head would have been if he hadn't been carried off.

"I think I get the idea," he murmured.

He returned the device to the place he had taken it from, extinguished all the lights, and left the apartment by way of the window with intent to investigate the key he had found—the one numbered 510.

XVII.

QUINNY reached the alley without incident, and this time had a look through the little window at the side of the stage door. Old Al was sitting in a dilapidated chair, leaning back, a newspaper spread across his lap, his chest rising and falling in a sleep-betraying movement. As the detective stared in, a little alarm clock on a table at the side of the chair went off stridently. It upset Quinny more than it did the doorman. Al merely opened his eyes, shut off the alarm, and got up. He picked up that round thing on a long strap which watchmen carry about with them and disappeared through

the door to the stage.

Quin Hite went out of the alley into Fortieth Street and around the block to the hotel, giving Wolfe and Max Allron quite a surprise as he walked into the lobby.

"A little while ago," the night clerk pointed out, "you went into Emily's room and didn't come out. Then you come walking in the front door. How come?"

"You do it with mirrors"—with a careless gesture. "Seen Emily?"

"Not since you went into her room."

"She wasn't there then."

A shuffling sound from beyond the elevator caught his ear and he looked around. There was the maid, bedraggled as usual, shuffling toward her room.

"Hey, Emily!" Quinny called. She stopped, slowly turned her head, and looked about. He walked down the hall toward her.

Quinny asked her about the door upstairs, and the maid insisted it had been unlocked when she went up in the morning to straighten up the apartment. How could she have got in otherwise?—she asked.

"I ain't skinny enough to crawl through keyholes," she concluded. "Not yet, anyhow."

She shuffled off to her cell and Quinny returned to the desk.

"Who lives in 510?" he asked of Wolfe.

"Nobody. It's been vacant for a couple of weeks."

Room 510 was small, containing a single bed, a bureau, and a marble-top washstand. There were no evidences of recent occupancy, not even a soiled towel—or a clean one, either. The door to a closet drew his attention—a very old door, its innumerable coats of paint causing it to look even older. Quinny opened it, looked in, and was rewarded.

The sequin costume hung from one of the hooks. An oblong walnut box had been thrust onto the lower shelf. Quinny got it down and, taking it to the bureau, opened it. It was a make-up box, with a mirror fastened to the inner side of the lid and well supplied with make-up. On the top of the box were carved the letters L. E.

Who would that be, wondered the detective. The make-up was distinctly feminine. He lifted the tray of cosmetics from the box to see what was in the bottom compartment. Some odds and ends of imitation jewelry and a woman's blond wig.

He put everything back carefully, stopping to examine the costume and slippers which were on the floor of the closet. There was a cute little hat on a shelf, with a long hatpin stuck into it.

The detective decided that he had a lot of thinking to do, and went on to Joan's room to do it.

Quinny's—or the late Mr. Lothrop's—cigar went out, and after a thorough search through his clothes and then the room he was forced to the conclusion that there weren't any matches. He'd have to go down to his room on the floor below to get some.

As he opened the door and started out into the hall, he was somewhat startled to see a figure quickly draw back into the stairway leading up to Lothrop's apartment.

"What the devil," he thought, "is Julian Davess doing here?"

Quinny racked his brains for the probable identity of the person Davess evidently expected. Only person he could think of in the hotel who entered into the case was Emily. He didn't see any connection between Davess and Emily, so he ruled her out.

But it was Emily. Quinny ruled her back in again.

"Did you get it?" he heard Davess ask. "God, you were gone long enough!"

"Sure, I got it," the maid responded. "But I had to wait for a chance to sneak back up. Quinny Hite was buzzing around downstairs—and what with him, and Wolfe, and Max Allron—well—"

They disappeared into one of the rooms.

The detective went down the hall after them like a swiftly moving shadow. He pressed close to the door to listen.

"I'm in a hell of a jam," Davess declared throatily. "The cops are looking for me all over. I can't go back to my apartment. There's probably a cop waiting for me there by now. I've been on the roof of that damned Athena for the last three hours." Quinny's eyebrows arched—not prettily. Had the lug seen him going to the apartment?

A muffled sound indicated that the woman had made some reply, but Quinny couldn't distinguish what she said.

"But it's got to be done!" exclaimed the man impatiently. "If the detectives find that list of Lothrop's securities and come to me about the ones I'm supposed to have, well, I'm cooked, that's all. They'll find the letters I wrote him, too! I've got to get into that safe—that's all! I know it's locked. I tried to get into it last night—after the murder—but I was too scared—too excited—to know what I was doing."

Once more the rumble of Emily's voice.

"No, they haven't. The cops won't find that safe until they strip the apartment. They haven't had time for that. Come on, where's the other entrance?"

The maid's voice sounded briefly.

XVIII.

QUINNY left the door and went to the open window at the end of the hall, which was on the fire escape of the hotel winding up from the theater alley. He climbed out and, by straddling the iron railing and leaning over as far as he could, he managed to get one eye past the side of the window.

Davess and Emily were standing on the farther side of the room near the entrance door. She was talking, and he couldn't even hear the sound of her voice. All he could hear were the street noises on Fortieth Street,

which he had never realized before were so loud or continuous.

Presently the maid gave a hopeless gesture of resignation and Davess took a few steps to the closet door. He pulled it open, glanced upward into it, then looked back at Emily and said something. He disappeared into the closet. Emily sat down in the room's only chair and leaned forward, her face in her hands.

I get it, Quinny thought swiftly.

He took another quick look at the maid and regained the comparative safety of the fire-escape platform. She hadn't moved. Quinny pushed his hat back and rubbed his forehead vigorously with his fingers. He wanted to see Davess. A weary grin spread over his face, and he climbed back into the hallway. Stopping at the door to the room where Emily was sitting, he turned the knob and walked in.

The maid looked up with consternation in her dark eyes.

"While we're waiting for your boy friend," Quinny grinned, "suppose you tell me how come Lothrop had that hole cut in his closet floor?"

"I don't know nothin' about it," mumbled the maid disconsolately.

"Davess said Lothrop put you in this room. What for?" demanded Quinny.

"That was a good while ago," she parried.

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"How long have you been in this hotel?"

"I came here five years ago. I've been working here four years."

"What were you doing the other year?" Quinny was getting interested.

The maid looked at him steadily for a moment, her thin lips curling in a saturnine smile. "Don't ask," she mumbled.

"I did ask."

The woman sighed slowly. "I hustled, if you gotta know."

Quinny was sorry he'd asked. He felt he should have known.

"Sorry I insisted," he temporized. "Of course, a good, honest hustler—"

"I wasn't honest, I wasn't good, and I never was any good!" she exclaimed passionately. "I've lied, I've stolen things, I've been what I've been, I'm a sot, I hit the pipe—I've done everything, mister. I'm rotten. And I don't die. I oughta died long ago. I shouldn't have ever been born." Quinny thought she was the forlornest female he'd ever seen—and he'd seen some sorry specimens here and there.

"But one thing I didn't do, Mr. Hite," she continued. "I didn't kill Mr. Lothrop. And I don't know who did, either."

Quinny came back to the matter in hand with a snap. "Ever know a guy named Carlo Ralph? Did magic mostly, I guess."

"Yes, I remember Carlo Ralph. He was a big act once, but that was before I knew him. Then he was a small-time act, playing the shooting galleries out West mostly. I was on the same bill with him quite a lot. I wasn't so hot, either." She grunted in what might have been intended for a chuckle but didn't sound like one.

"I think maybe he's still alive," replied Quinny. "But where, I don't know. When did you see him last—and where?"

The maid gave vent to her peculiar chuckle again. "Why don't you ask me when and where I saw the Prince of Wales last? I've seen him, too—and I can remember that better."

"The Prince of Wales didn't have anything to do with this murder!" snapped Quinny. And then, as an afterthought, he added, "I hope."

He got up. "Tell that lug when he gets done going through Lothrop's safe I want to see him—in 508," he said briefly.

He went out; closed the door behind him, and went on down the hall to Joan's room, completely muffing the dim outlines of a person skulking in the shadows of the stairway.

To the absence of his customary circumspection might be charged the bringing of another death to the Du Nord.

XIX.

THE telephone was ringing in Joan's room when he entered, and he found the room's tenant on the downstairs end when he answered it—an indignant tenant who wanted to know how much longer she was to be kept

waiting in the lobby by her lord but not yet master. Quinny told her to come on up and quit yapping. She came up.

"Funny business was going on out in the hall," he explained briefly. "I didn't want you to come up and gum the works."

"What funny business?" she asked, going to the bureau and taking off the hat that Quinny regarded as funny business itself. "Funny business isn't a novelty in this joint."

"This was—kinda. Julian Davess—that you probably read about in the tabs tonight—had a date with Emily." Quinny regarded the bed tentatively.

"Emily who?" asked Joan, turning around. "And you keep off that bed, do you hear? Looks like you have been camping on it all night as it is. I thought you were working on a murder case."

"If you think I haven't been working, you're nuts," he replied cheerily. "I've been all over this lousy collection of villages people call New York. I've climbed up the stairs of a ten-story building and then went down a fire escape to the sixth floor, and I've climbed up to the top of this one by way of the Athena Theater in back—and down again. I've been way out east to Third Avenue, where you never was—and I hope you never are—and I've had beer and skittles in a Sixth Avenue barroom uptown with a fair-haired broad from Park Avenue. By the way, Jones, what's skittles?"

"Who," asked Joan pointedly, "was the broad?"

"David Earle's daughter," he answered.

Joan got the electric stove out of the bottom drawer and a can of soup and began preparations for a post-midnight snack by opening the can.

Quinny watched her as she poured the contents of the can into a dime-store pot and put it on the stove.

"We might have a guest in a few minutes," he suggested. "We're gonna have, matter of fact, Julian Davess." Quinny explained the events of the last few hours in some detail.

"I think Davess killed Lou Lothrop," she commented as he paused momentarily. "And I think that Park Avenue woman—Lothrop's wife—was in on it," she summed up, and then added the most damaging bit of all: "I don't like her, anyway."

"You didn't like the Earle girl when I told you about her, either," Quinny pointed out.

"Certainly I didn't like her!" agreed Joan vehemently. "Silly-headed little nitwit. What business had she visiting Lou Lothrop in his apartment? Probably her father got wise to that and went up there and shot him."

"That's two people you've got killing Lothrop," observed Quinny. "According to you, old Lothrop certainly could soak it up."

"Well, one of 'em did, anyway."

"I ain't so sure."

This went on for some time, and the noisy clock by the side of the bed registered more or less accurately something after four o'clock before a timid knock on Joan's door announced the arrival of the expected guest. Davess

came in, after inquiring for "Mr. Hite," and sat in one of the chairs by the table. Quinny duly presented him to Joan, who thereupon went over and sat on the bed to watch her reasonably idolized male in action.

"Did you get what you went after?" Quinny asked, staring into Davess' troubled eyes.

Davess admitted finally that he had succeeded in getting into the safe—it was a very old one, and a child could get into it without too much trouble. If a child could find it—that was the trick. A couple of windows in the library had been blocked up because of the erection of a big building next door. The safe was hidden in one of these. Also, he'd got what he went after.

"You were a hell of a long time at it, if it was so easy," commented the detective. "The cops found a couple of guns in your apartment tonight. One of them is a Mauser—and Lothrop was killed with a Mauser rifle." He eyed Davess coldly. "What about it?"

"Oh, that . . . that rifle hasn't been fired since 1918. I brought it back with me after the War. Just a souvenir—captured from the Germans."

"I got to stash you out somewhere," mumbled Quinny. "I'm not obstructing justice, but I ain't helping, either. I'm going to send you to my sister in Philadelphia."

"This room," observed Davess as he and Quinny started for the door later, "was the living room of the suite that Désirée la Fond occupied thirty years ago. You see the archway there blocked up now—"

"My God!" interrupted Joan in tones of horror. "I shan't be able to sleep a wink!"

"Do you remember Max Allron?" Quinny asked, one hand on the door-knob. "Musical director of 'The Girl from Dieppe'?"

"Oh, yes." Davess eyed Quinny curiously. "Nice fellow. Joined up in '15 and had the bad luck to have his eardrums shattered. Finished him as a musician, of course."

"He can't hear?" asked Quinny, astonished. "Why, I was talking to him this afternoon. You're nuts. He could hear, all right."

"If he understood you, he listened with his eyes."

The detective watched Davess as the broker went down the hall toward the elevator—which he wasn't to use—reflecting that it would take an extra good lip reader to have heard shots and a phonograph—with his eyes. He turned to Joan:

"Five dollars'll get you a dime Davess never gets to Philadelphia."

Joan wasn't betting—not at those odds.

XX.

QUINNY sat and talked with Joan for some time after Davess left. Finally he decided that he'd better go to his room and catch a couple of hours' sleep, if he were going to get any at all.

Kissing the girl good night—her idea, by the way—he went out into the hallway and started for the stairs. But, much as he wanted to, he wasn't going to bed yet.

He was about to pass 510 when he noticed a faint light in the crack under the door. He stopped. Better have a look into this. He carefully tried the knob and the door opened. He peeked in, hoping he wouldn't discover some stalwart stranger inside getting ready to take to the hay.

He stood there, staring unbelievingly for a minute or two. At each side of the narrow bed, at the head and at the foot, there were candles flickering. And on the bed, dressed in the sequin gown, blond wig, and satin slippers, lay a calm figure with hands crossed peacefully one over the other.

He stared down at the still figure on the bed with a rare expression of compassion in his dark eyes, for the moment too upset to think connectedly.

"Poor thing," he murmured. "She went and fixed herself up all pretty in that shiny dress, put candles where they ought to be, and stuck herself with a hatpin."

He turned away to look around the room. The make-up box was on the bureau, its contents scattered about. Then he discovered a sheet of hotel stationery on which was written a scrawling note in lead pencil.

To WHOEVER FINDS ME:

I killed Louis Lothrop and Désirée la Fond.

He was my first lover, and she came between us.

All his promises to take me out of the chorus and make me a star he forgot when he saw this woman. Like he forgets his promises to everyone. I thought that after a while I would forget, but last night it was too much for me. I couldn't stand it. I killed them. I want to die. What else is there?

You knew me as Emily. But I was

LYNN EVANS.

Quinny turned slowly around to stare at the figure on the bed.

"Lothrop's girl friend before La Fond," he muttered. "Maybe I oughta doped that out—but I didn't."

She sure is made up, he reflected, and the thought gave him another idea. He gave the room a cursory inspection and found no towels or anything resembling one soiled with make-up. He knew it was practically impossible for anyone to apply the amount of make-up the woman had on her face without getting it on the hands. And her hands showed no trace of it, not even under the nails.

There was also no lead pencil in the room that he could find, but the note could have been written before she came to this room.

He walked over to the side of the bed and stood for a moment or two staring down at the placid face.

He decided to let Emily lie in state for a while and rediscover the murderer, as he felt convinced it was, later—unless someone else found her sooner. Which he decided was fairly likely.

Max Allron was seated at a small table busily writing and did not look around as the detective entered—did not, in fact, look up until Quinny's shadow fell across the sheet of paper before him.

"Oh, hello," he said carelessly, "I didn't hear you come in."

"I knocked on the door first."

Allron smiled faintly. "I don't hear very well," he said.

"Yeah, so I hear," answered Quinny, sitting down comfortably on the bed. "Fact is, I hear you can't hear at all, except with your eyes."

Allron shook his head. "That is an exaggeration."

Quinny sniffed at the smoke-laden air and lifted an eyebrow. The brand of tobacco used by Allron was distinctive, and the detective recalled that he had noticed the same odor in Earle's office.

"And you were up in Earle's office tonight."

Allron stared hard at Quinny for a moment before answering.

"Just what are you driving at, Hite? Are you trying to get me mixed up in this murder?"

"If I can, I will," replied Quinny. "I got a thousand bucks coming to me if I can crack this case before the cops do. You'd do as well as anybody for the fall guy—and you give me the idea you know more than you're telling. But I'll give you something: I'm turning in the killer at nine o'clock tomorrow night. That's tonight, if you figure this is today."

"Why don't you turn him in now if you're so sure who he is?" Allron almost permitted a sneer to form on his usually affable lips.

"There's two answers to that. One reason is that I'm saving it for the *Observer*. The other reason is that I got to try something out in Lothrop's apartment at exactly eight thirty o'clock tonight. One more little bit of evidence—and the case is busted wide open."

"Who's going with you—Pierson?"

"No—I'll be all by myself. I just said I had to crack this business ahead of the police."

"Meanwhile, your suspect will probably beat it." Allron laughed softly.

"No, he won't lam—on account of you're the only guy I'm spilling this to. You wasn't going anywhere, was you?" Quinny stretched wearily. "Well, good night, brother. A man has to sleep sometime."

XXI.

THE telephone at the side of Quinny's bed was screaming. He reached out an uncertain hand and brought the instrument to bed with him, knocking an assortment of small objects from the table in doing so. Then, first getting his head adjusted nicely against a pillow, he said, "Hello."

"Mr. Hite?" demanded a female voice.

"Yes, my love. Who are you?"

"Phyllis Lothrop—and I've got bad news," the voice snapped. "Julian

Davess is in jail."

"What's bad about that?" asked Quinny. "I thought he would be by now."

The noises that came over the telephone didn't make words immediately. Presently they did:

"Listen, honeysuckle—you're getting more action out of me than anybody ever did." Quinny was aggrieved, but not too much. "Now, I want you to meet me"—he glanced at his alarm clock—"at three o'clock in the *Observer* office—Parker's office—and bring the rest of the dough along. On account of that's when I'm going to give you the name of the mug that killed Lou Lothrop—and others."

"I'll be there."

Quinny got up, and, after replacing those garments he had shed on going to bed, went upstairs to rediscover the murder of the maid. He had been rather in hope that it had been discovered by someone else, but it hadn't.

He opened the door to 510 and peeked in. Nothing had changed, except of course that the candles had long since burned away to little mounds of melted wax in the soap dish and saucer which had served as candlesticks. Quinny closed the door again and went into Joan's room to call Centre Street. He got Deputy Commissioner Murton without much delay.

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LIGHTING one of Louis Lothrop's cigars with a match donated by Jay Parker, Quin Hite leaned back comfortably in one of the editor's chairs, pushed his derby back on his head, and stared thoughtfully for a moment at Phyllis Lothrop.

"I got to start from the beginning," Quinny said, turning his gaze toward Parker. "Phyllis, here, has been in the apartment and knows the way it's laid out, and you can get it from the floor plan you've got there." This was a rather crude creation Quinny had done himself. "Lothrop was sitting at the end of the table where I put an 'LL,' the woman was at the other end, marked 'LF.'

"The La Fond dame was shot in the forehead with a revolver. You can see by the plan that you couldn't see her from anywhere outside the room except the dining room or the library door. She wasn't facing the library door, so it ain't likely she was shot from there. If she was shot from the dining room, the shooter would have had to stand almost in the drawing room before he could see her. And then she could see him. Hold that in your heads a minute.

"Lothrop was shot with a Mauser rifle, and you could tell by the wound that the shooter wasn't very close. The farthest away you could see Lothrop was the back wall of the dining room—or in the kitchen through that window into the dining room."

"Evidently the crime was committed by more than one person, then," commented Parker, tapping a yellow pencil against his teeth.

"Yeah," agreed Quinny. "That's what the killer wanted people to think. But there was only one murderer."

"Do you mean to say," asked Parker, "that the murderer went up to that apartment, loaded with a military rifle and a revolver, and shot those people? That doesn't make sense to me."

"Me, either," said Quinny. "But this guy wants to do a little fancy work."

"But, Qui—Mr. Hite—Lou and that woman were sitting there calmly at the table—" Phyllis Lothrop began, but Quinny stopped her with an up-raised hand.

"Yeah, I know—and if I was still on the cops, I'd be asking you how you knew. But this afternoon I'm not asking—I'm telling." The detective relighted his cigar. "You want to know how this happened without either Lothrop or the woman showing any signs of knowing what was going on? It was like this:

"The killer stood at the side of the table facing toward the front wall of the apartment—the table in between. He shot the woman with the revolver, probably wrapped up in a handkerchief, and at the same second got Lothrop with the rifle—"

"Nonsense—you're nuts, Hite!" exclaimed Parker.

"I ain't either, nuts!" replied the detective. "You see, he had the rifle fixed up back there in that kitchen window, and all he had to do was to pull

a string he'd fixed up when Lothrop's head was just right for the bullet to hit. I found the screw-eyes where he'd run the string."

"But how could he aim the rifle if he was in the drawing room?" demanded Parker, still unbelieving.

"There was the mirror on the front wall that he could see the kitchen window with. But the window was too far away for him to see the rifle well enough for him to aim it that way. So he rigged up a gag with two lights, and when he got those two lights lined up in the mirror with Lothrop's head from where he was standing, he knew the gun was aimed just right. There was just one line he could stand on where this would work—and that was from the side of the table to the library door. The last screw-eye was at the library door, but he didn't stand there because he couldn't have shot the woman in the forehead from there. She was facing Lothrop in the opposite direction.

"Of course, they knew him, or thought they did, and weren't afraid of him, but that don't help much. There was several people up there that they knew and weren't afraid of. Let's look 'em over.

"David Earle was up to the apartment a couple of times that night. So far as having the chance to kill Lothrop and maybe a reason—yes to both. But Earle wouldn't have had any reason to kill the woman—and he wouldn't go about killing somebody that way."

Quinny paused and eyed Phyllis tentatively, then went on:

"If I hadn't doped out how this murder was done, Julian Davess and you would have been the best bets. I mean if it had been done by two people instead of one. But you, Phyllis, would never bother about anything as complicated as this—and Davess isn't smart enough."

"There were two other people at this party. One of 'em was Lynn Evans—we knew her as Emily. But she's dead—killed because she knew too much." Quinny brushed some cigar ashes out of his lap.

"Who was the other person?" asked Parker.

"The other guy is the mug who did the killing," stated Quinny, looking for a match. "His name is Carlo Ralph."

"Carlo Ralph?" exclaimed Phyllis. "Why, he hasn't been seen for years."

"Yes, he has," answered Quinny. "Fact is, I been talking to him. Tonight I'm turning him in to Murton and Inspector Pierson—if he don't knock me off before that."

"Not much chance of that, I guess, since you know who he is," laughed Parker.

"There's a hell of a good chance," grumbled Quinny. "And I didn't say I knew who he was. I only said I'd been talking to him. Carlo Ralph did these murders, all right—but up to now Carlo Ralph can be either of two people. If I was on the cops, I'd grab 'em both, and if I spilled what I know to Murton, they'd do it. You wouldn't want that—you'd rather have the dope exclusive, about nine o'clock—too late for the early tabs to do anything

about it. So I'm playing it that way. Did you get the dough from the cashier?"

"Certainly," said Parker. "I'll turn it over as soon as you—"

"I want it now. Things can happen to me tonight, and I ain't taking no chance at all of going to hallelujah with some damned newspaper owing me half a grand."

"All right." Parker gave in, with the thought that he might be getting something extra if Quinny did get dusted off. He disgorged a roll of bills that looked too thin to be that much money. Quinny wet his thumb and counted them.

"Here's mine," Phyllis suddenly put in. She got a roll of bills from her bag and tossed them with unladylike skill into Quinny's lap. "I'm betting you know what you're talking about."

XXII.

RETURNING to the Du Nord, Quinny encountered Allron.

"How's the case getting on?"

"It's practically in the bag," answered Quinny. "I'll be out of work again tomorrow, unless somebody else gets knocked off. Right now the old sleuth needs a drink. How about it, Allron—feel like buying?"

Allron shook his head negatively and said he had some things to attend to, so Quinny ambled on out of the hotel and around the block to the saloon next to the theater. He sat down in a booth facing the door, ordered a shot, and watched to see if he had been followed. There wasn't much danger, he figured, of the murderer's knocking him off so long as he stayed around where there were other people, since the killer's only reason for including him in the list of victims would be to escape exposure. A murder in public wouldn't help him any.

Quinny eyed his untasted drink thoughtfully, and moved it around in a spot of sunlight coming through a small window set high in the wall over the booth. It looked like it was going to be a pretty good drink. But he never was to find out. He lifted the glass and leaned forward to meet it with his lips just as something smacked against the window, accompanied by the sound of a high-powered gun and the impact of something in the wooden paneling of the booth back of the detective's head.

XXIII.

MISTY rain was falling when Quinny returned furtively to Fortieth Street at a few minutes before eight. He found Inspector Pierson and the dapper commissioner seated in a booth in the rear of the Delta Saloon and went toward them, noting happily that there wasn't any window in this booth. He slid into the vacant seat opposite them.

"You look nervous, Hite," commented Pierson.

"That's because I *am* nervous," replied the detective, and gave a succinct account of the afternoon's shooting, with him as the target. "I'd hate awful to have all my work wasted on account of me getting shot at—and hit."

Murton smiled. "You must be on the right track, otherwise—"

The commissioner and Pierson finished their drinks while Quinny outlined what he wanted them to do. No—he didn't want any drink. He hadn't wanted one really since he practically had the last one shot out from under him. He concluded his instructions with:

"After that, don't move—no matter what happens—*don't move till you hear me laugh.*

"It's five after eight now—you go on up. I'll be along in a few minutes. Another thing, don't do no smoking up there. That would be dangerous. See you later."

Quinny came out of the Delta and apparently threw off all his previous caution. He walked boldly past the theater, which was giving out its customary bedlam of sound, stopping for a moment to look down the alley on the stage-door side of the theater. No one was in sight except the night doorman, Al, who was engaged in stuffing some

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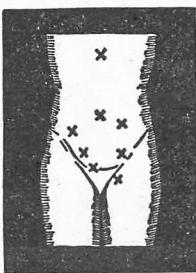
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trash into a huge box just inside the entrance to the alley. It seemed to be pretty well filled with refuse already. The doorman nodded to Quinny as he looked up and recognized him.

The detective walked rapidly around by way of Eighth Avenue to the Du Nord.

There wasn't anyone in sight as Quinny silently came into the hall on the fifth floor. From where he paused at the top of the stairs he could see a trace of light under the door to 510, but this wasn't proof that the cops were still on watch within. If they were there they were keeping pretty quiet for cops, he decided. There was also a light under the door of Allron's room—and he hadn't seen Allron downstairs when he came in. This didn't prove anything, either.

Quinny soft-footed down the hall to the room at the extreme rear—the one he had seen Emily and Davess enter previously. To open the door took a few seconds' concentration with the keys he had, during which he could not watch the hallway. Then the lock yielded and he quickly slipped into the room. He didn't close the door entirely, but stood waiting with his ear to the crack that remained. A minute passed. Then he heard a door open and close somewhere down the hall.

Queerly enough, the sound brought an expression of satisfaction to his eyes, but without peeking out to see who it might be, he closed the door tight and switched on the light. He hurried over to the closet door and pulled it open. It was, to the casual eye, just an empty closet, but Quinny's eye wasn't casual. He examined the walls of the closet as best he could in the faint light until he found that one end had a panel, which came out easily and revealed a ladder leading upward.

He climbed up the ladder as far as it went; then, striking a match—it

was as dark as pitch here—found another panel which, pulled in, covered an opening into Lothrop's closet, as he had expected.

He entered Lothrop's bedroom, lighted to some extent by the reflection from illuminated signs on distant buildings of Times Square. The apartment seemed completely deserted as he went silently to the door opening into the dining room and then crept along the wall to the little hall to the library. He neither saw nor heard any indication that there was anyone in the huge drawing room. Reaching the library, he peered through the doorway and saw the huge bulk of Inspector Pierson in a chair close to the wall just to the left of the door. He entered, and in doing so gave the inspector quite a start. The commissioner was safely ensconced behind the door on the other side.

"O. K.," Quinny greeted them. "You're sittin' just right. Stay like that—*till you hear me laugh.*"

Quinny sort of dissolved into the blackness of the library and returned to Lothrop's bedchamber, leaving the door open some six inches or so. He leaned against the wall and waited—waited in a silence that was appalling, made more so by the distant noises from the Athena Theater and Times Square beyond. He waited some time.

Then he heard a slight noise in the room across from Lothrop's bedroom and became instantly alert. He peered out at the dark oblong which denoted the doorway to the room across. Presently this dark spot became mottled—something was moving there. Quinny pulled his door open and stepped out into the hall. At the same time he switched on the lights in the bedroom, which, dimly illuminating the hall, revealed a figure in the opposite doorway which he recognized easily—more especially since it was one he had confidently expected to see. The grim, foreboding eyes of Al Wassermann, the doorman, stared back at him.

"Hello, Al," Quinny said. "I've been waiting for you." He uneasily eyed the revolver in the doorman's hand.

"I'm going to kill you," said Al quietly.

"Yeah? What for?" inquired Quinny, wishing his spine would quit swishing about.

"You know too much."

"Not too much," returned the detective. "You are Carlo Ralph—you killed Lothrop and La Fond and Emily—Lynn Evans. I know that. But there's maybe a couple of other—"

"I'm going to kill you," repeated the doorman. "I got to."

"Don't be a damn fool, Al," said Quinny impatiently. "You have done everything all right up to now—and now you're figuring on doing something that will just finish you off. I don't blame you for what you done. I'm not on the cops. And I doped it out for you to come up here tonight—practically sent for you by way of your buddy, Max Allron—so I could find out what I don't know already. I've cashed in—heavy—on this business, and I'm going to cash in some more. Get me? You, my boy, will get yours. You're going

to need it, on account of you're going to have to do some traveling. Maybe you could go back to South Africa."

The doorman's fixed gaze wavered a little.

"I think I could fix it for you to find yourself on a boat headed that way—if you play ball," agreed the detective. "Besides, you've got the gun, and I don't pack one. What can you lose?"

"All right," the doorman suddenly agreed. "No tricks—or you'll get what *they* got—and just as quick."

They went to the library, Quinny leading the way, with the unpleasant suspicion that the revolver was pointed at his broad back and the certainty that his concealed allies wouldn't be able to help much if the doorman got nervous and cut loose.

XXIV.

QUINNY plumped himself down in the first chair he came to in the library and waved the doorman to the one at the end of the table. Al sat down cautiously, never taking his eyes from the detective. His back was toward the door to the drawing room, where Murton and Inspector Pierson had practically stopped breathing in a whole-hearted effort at complete silence.

Quinny rested his arms on the table and directed his gaze at Al. "Here's what I've figured out, Al. You shot Lothrop with a Mauser rifle, which you had left over from the Boer War. You fixed up a gadget so you could knock him off while you was standing at the side of the table. There was a mistake you made here. You used a piece of wood which had some letters on the back—NE 3—to make the thing out of. That was a length of wood cut from a piece of scenery, and the letters the last of what it said before it was cut off 'SCENE 3.' I've seen the same thing lots of times—backstage.

"That told me that whoever made the thing was connected with the theater—nearly everybody in the case. But there was some other things. The Mauser rifle—7.66 millimeter—the Boers used that caliber gun, and so did the Spaniards in '98. You fought with the Boers in that war with the English—so you could have had one. So could Davess. Earle and Lothrop both could have had a Mauser of that caliber—Spanish-American souvenir. But neither Earle nor Davess, if they had set out to kill Lothrop, would have gone to all that trouble. They'd have showed up probably with an automatic and done the job. Besides, they didn't have any reason to kill the dame. The piece of board is more important. That come from a theater. The nearest one is the Athena. Davess wasn't in the show business any more, so he wouldn't be likely to get a piece of wood from a theater to make this thing out of. There wouldn't be much sense in David Earle carrying a hunk of board from one of his theaters to make the aiming gag.

"So it wasn't hard to dope out that the piece of board came from the Athena. Lots of people could have snaked it from the Athena—but why? Besides getting the wood, the thing had to be put together. That would take

a little time. The guy that made it had to know that mirror was just where it was—back of where Lothrop usually sat—and he had to know Lothrop usually sat there at a party. There was just one guy that could get the board *easy*, have the time to put the gadget together, and know *all* about this apartment. That was you. You've been on this job five years, so you had plenty opportunity at other parties to know where Lothrop sat—and you could figure that he wouldn't sit anywhere else on account of that was where he probably sat at the first party.

"There was one other gent who *could* have, but not so likely. That's Max Allron. I own up that mug had me guessing. On the program out there in the front room it says 'Max Allron, Musical Director,' or something like that. So far as I could see, this Max Allron was just a lousy master of ceremonies whenever he could get a job and didn't have anything to do with music. He tried to sell me the idea that Carlo Ralph was killed in the war. I found out different, 'cause I saw a letter written by Carlo Ralph—dated after the war. The only reason I could pin this to was that he might be Carlo Ralph himself.

"Then I find out that Max Allron had his ears shot out during the war, and that's why he ain't in the music racket now. Of course, this guy still could've been you, but I didn't think so. But he had a reason for covering you up—and I've got an idea about that."

Al scowled. "That tramp has been living off of me for two years," he said. "He knew who I was—and I had to pay him to keep his mouth shut."

"That's what I figured. But here's something that bothered me: How

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the hell is it that Lou Lothrop never recognized you?" Quinny fished several washers from his pocket and squeezed them tightly in his right hand, which rested in his lap.

"I don't look anything like I did—back in nineteen eight," replied the doorman. "Then I was rather round-faced and pretty well filled out. I had to watch my diet—then. But the war—well, war changes a lot of things besides maps. I was in a German prison hospital the last eighteen months of it—and they couldn't do much about feeding themselves, let alone the prisoners. I don't think Lou Lothrop ever gave me a second look after he hired me—and not much of a look then. I stopped him on the street one day when I heard about this job, and told him I was an old vaudevillian and needed work. He gave me this job—and the extra work up here. But he never knew who I was."

Quinny leaned forward, resting his chin on his left hand with his left elbow on the table, staring absently at the threatening gun in the doorman's hand. The absent part was pure bluff—his interest in the weapon never wavered.

"Looky," said Quinny, moistening his dry lips with the tip of his tongue, "did you take this job with the idea of knocking him off?"

"Of course," answered Al grimly. "I wanted the job so I could get at him when I was ready. Then I wrote him a note, telling him that at last he was about to pay for what he had done to me. I wrote two or three notes. I wanted to worry him. Then I got curious about how he was taking it and told him he could write to me care of General Delivery. I got a letter from him, saying a lot of stuff about revenge being stupid and at the same time acknowledging that he had

done a wrong—which he said he wanted to make right, if he could. He offered to send me thirty dollars a week—I'd said that owing to him I was a poor man when I should be ready to retire. I decided to take the money, but I didn't change my mind about my revenge. A couple of weeks ago I got a letter from him saying that he was giving up the theater and wouldn't be able to pay me any more. He said he was going to have this last party and asked me to come. I realized then that the time had come. Lothrop should die in the same place he had brought me to ruin."

"I had come here to his first party—I came up here wearing the dog costume, to beg him to give me back my wife, to take himself out of my life. He sneered at me—told me to go find another kennel."

The doorman's eyes glittered with hate. "I kept that dog costume for over thirty years, to wear when I killed him."

"Your name is Karl Wassermann, ain't it?" Quinny asked hurriedly. He eyed the trigger finger of the man's hand with apprehension as he strove to get his mind away from Lothrop for a moment. "K-A-R-L, not C-A-R-L?"

"Karlo Ralph Wassermann," affirmed the doorman. "How did you know it was 'K' instead of 'C'?"

"Your wife had a locket up in her apartment with 'D.D.—K.W.' on it, I figured that might stand for Karl Wassermann—if you spell it that way, like the Germans do. Just guessing—wouldn't prove anything, unless you admitted it, but it gave me an idea that it could have been you. There were other things, though—those big trunks in your room, smelling like a pawnshop. Nobody but an actor would have trunks like that."

Wassermann nodded perceptibly in agreement.

"You killed Lynn Evans, too. Of course, that didn't matter much—she didn't want to live any more anyhow."

"She knew too much," affirmed Al. "I didn't want to do it, but I was afraid she'd get hopped up and tell things. Come on, what's the proposition you were going to make?"

Quinny scratched his nose with the forefinger of his left hand.

"Wait a minute—there's something else," he said. "Why did you leave your magician's wand up there on the bookshelf—with that trick handkerchief? That had me for a little. The damned thing could have been an orchestra leader's baton—and that pointed to Allron. The trick handkerchief was a magician's prop—one of those things they stuff into one end of a tube white and pull it out the other end red. It was the thing that made me think Carlo Ralph was the one who did the killing. What did you leave it for?"

"I didn't mean to," explained Al. "I took the rifle downstairs to hide it—"

"In that big trash box in the alley. I've been trying to get a chance to frisk that box all day."

Al nodded slightly and went on. "Then when I came back upstairs Emily started to cut up—she was all full of dope—and by the time I got her down the ladder in the closet I forgot all about the wand."

"What was Emily doing up there, anyhow?" Quinny asked.

"I told her she was invited to the party, because she had been at the first one. She got dressed up in the costume I got out of hock for her, and she waited in the room under Lothrop's bedroom. After the shooting I brought her up to the apartment. She was so full of dope that she didn't even know that Lothrop and Dora were dead—sitting at the table with them. We sat there and joked for a few minutes and had a drink—to the success of 'The Girl from Dieppe.' I knew that Emily wouldn't remember anything about it, because she never remembered anything she did when she was doping before.

"But this time she did. I guess the sight of them the next day brought it back. It was a crazy idea, bringing her up—besides, it made me forget the wand. She got an idea that because they weren't talking or laughing they must have passed out and wanted to do something about it. I had a terrible time getting her away."

"What were you and Emily doing up here last night when you put the slug on me?" asked Quinny, fingering his jaw that still was a little bit sore.

"I told Allron to tell her to meet me up there, because I wanted to scare her into keeping her mouth shut in case she did remember anything. The costume was her own idea, and we'll never know the answer to that."

Quinny nestled the washers in his hand and lifted his eyebrows as though in agreement with Al's last statement.

"I still don't know what the wand was for," he complained.

"I thought you did," replied Al. "I used it to wrap the revolver in—this revolver, by the way. I stood there by the table and said I had been practicing a trick that I wanted to show them. I aimed the gun in the handkerchief at Dora—she was too full of wine to notice closely what I was doing. Then I watched the lights on the rifle in the mirror—you know about that. Lothrop wasn't moving around at all and the two lights were lined up perfectly with his head. I held up the wand and told them to watch closely—and then I shot Dora. The string to the rifle was tied to the wand, and I waved it just as I pulled the trigger. And Lothrop died—

"Afterward I killed Lynn Evans to keep her from talking. I dressed her up in the costume—the sequin gown—and put candles by her side."

The doorman swallowed heavily, but did not relax his gaze at Quinny.

"Max Allron told me a little while ago that you had said you knew all about this, and that you would find out anything you didn't know—at half past eight tonight. For that I gave him the last cent I had. And now what?"

"I found out what I didn't know—at half past eight," said Quinny.

The doorman frowned. "You said you would help me get away—maybe to South Africa. I would like to go there to die—I was born there, you know. But I think a better way to finish this would be to kill you and myself. I tried to kill you this afternoon. This is better—I can't miss now."

"Don't be in such a hurry," objected Quinny. Cold chills were skiing up and down his backbone. "I got something I want to tell you—and it's awful funny—about Davess—even now you'll have to laugh—" His lips

parted in a wide grin that he didn't feel at all. He chuckled; then, as though entirely overcome, he tilted his head back—and laughed. Louder than he'd ever laughed in his life before.

"This is no time for jokes—" began Al.

Beyond the range of Al's vision, under the table, Quinny's wrist snapped and the washers struck the floor across the room beyond Al's back. The doorman jerked his head around to see what this interruption was, and as quickly jerked back again as he realized he'd been tricked. But too late. As his head turned, Quinny's hand grasped the revolver barrel and twisted it from the man's hand.

"Bingo!" exclaimed Quinny, springing to his feet as Pierson charged into the room with Commissioner Murton not too close on his heels. Then there was an interval in which the little library was filled with bad words in two languages—English and Afrikaan. The latter was a lingual waste so far as Quinny was concerned.

"Nice work, Hite," said the commissioner, when things had quieted down somewhat. "Come down to my office tomorrow and see me."

Quinny lighted the last of his supply



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of Louis Lothrop's truly superior Havanas and blew out a satisfying cloud of smoke.

"Yeah—maybe." He inspected the cigar thoughtfully. "If I got time. See you tomorrow, then, maybe. Give this guy the best in the house when you get him downtown. He ain't a bad guy—outside of a bad habit of knocking off people he don't like." He turned to Carlo Ralph, firmly in Pierson's grasp. The doorman was pale and perspiring and his eyes burned in a wild glare. He was shaking, but not from fear. "I'll be seein' you too, sometime. Maybe in Matteawan. Nice place, too—three squares a day, and nothing to do but walk around and take it easy. On account of you're nuts. You can't go thirty years living for revenge without goin' off the hatch. And nuts don't get the hot seat."

He tipped the old derby insolently at the commissioner and left.

Quinny went back to the fifth floor to Joan's room and, since she wasn't due back from her job for hours yet, he composed himself on her bed for a long, restful snooze. He forgot, again, to remove his shoes or put anything under them.

Somewhere in the early-morning hours he woke up and beheld the rent payer of the room standing by the bed with a look in her eyes that he'd seen there before and still didn't like.

"Hiya, Jones," he mumbled sleepily. He sat up with an effort. "'Sall over. We got a grand in the pocket, a murderer in the jug—and nothing at all to do till tomorrow."

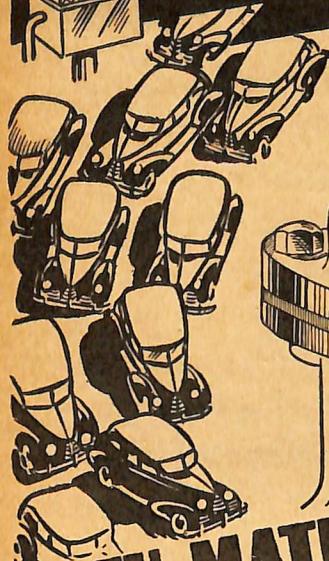
Joan said yes, and what was he planning to do tomorrow?

Quinny looked at her, wrinkled his forehead, and hazarded the opinion that tomorrow was going to turn out to be his wedding day. The girl smiled.

"Damn' tootin'," she said.

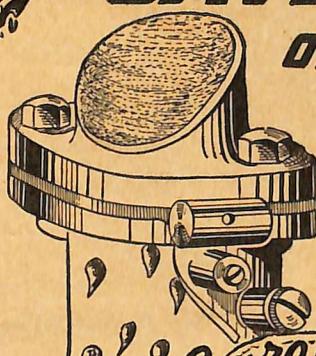
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